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Sam Gary, The River Sport; OR, THE Lawyer's Foxy Clerk.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "SWEEPSTAKES SAM," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," "MONTE JIM," ETC., ETC.



"WELL?" FROWNED THE RIVER SPORT, WITH A GESTURE OF IMPATIENT DISGUST. "WHAT'S BITING YOU, FOXY MOBBS?"

Sam Cary, the River Sport:

("TOP-SAWYER SAM.")

OR,

The Lawyer's Foxy Clerk.

The Romance of a River Free Lance.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THE MAN OF SILK," "MONTE JIM," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE JAWS OF GRIM DEATH.

A WIDE brown flood rolling steadily onward, silent and pitiless. Here and there a half-submerged burden; a time-worn, moss-grown log, far gone in decay; the skeleton of a forest monarch, with gaunt, rain-bleached arms quivering above the muddy tide, slowly waving to and fro as the swirling eddies and uneasy boilings clung to or repulsed the barkless trunk; or it might be a mass of living green, quivering and shivering, bending and bowing as it swept closer on the rapid current, with leaves still fresh and crisp as when forming part of the primeval forest only a few short hours ago.

Everywhere some sign of the destroyer. In everything some symbol of its mighty power. In nothing the faintest gleam of hope.

A curse, that was a groan as well, broke from the livid lips of the despairing wretch whose bloodshot eyes roved feverishly over the wide expanse of waters. Broken, incoherent sentences fell from his lips; a wild, blood-curdling mixture of imprecation and prayer.

Back and forth he strode, not wholly unlike a caged tiger chafing against its narrow limits, but more like a wolf whom almost certain death has robbed of all courage, of all emotion save that of craven despair.

To the right—only to start back with a choking cry as another bit of his scanty empire was swallowed up by the silent yet frightful waters. To the left—only to see another yard of the yellow sand crumble and vanish from sight forever. Backward—to note with dizzy, blurring sight how surely the eddying waters were licking away the sands without sound or warning. Forward—to catch his breath with a fresh shudder as he saw the swift, steady current undermining the slender willows and cottonwoods there growing, until, with a sudden shivering, trembling of the feathery foliage, a portion of the "tow-head" would be bitten away, to sink into the whirling tide and be sucked down out of sight the next instant.

What had been, only four-and-twenty hours before, a spacious reach of sand-bar, rising from the muddy waters of the mighty Mississippi, was now but a miserable islet in the middle of the river.

Then, an island long enough to form a comfortable promenade from end to end. Its lower point stretching out long and narrow, damp with the waters which were gradually receding. Its center high and dry, the sand shining white and bright under the warm spring sun. Its head covered with a growth of willows and cottonwoods, lithe and slender, green and refreshing to the sight.

There had been little of fear mingled with the anger which this man felt when he was landed from the steamboat, the previous evening, on this "tow-head." It was not the first time he had been "marooned." As often he had escaped without injury, and he would escape again, "to get even," as he now viciously growled.

He curled up on the still warm sands where they were dryest, and slept peacefully through the night, unconscious of the silent, terrible change which was going on through the hours of darkness.

Who can tell how or why? Who can say what slight obstacle first started the change of channel?

For change it did during the night, and when the marooned gambler awoke with the first rays of the sun, a cry of stupefied amazement broke from his lips as he rubbed his heavy eyes and stared around him.

For a moment he half believed himself still sleeping, still dreaming, for surely this was not the same bar on which he had been landed?

He saw a handful of the feathery-topped willows sway violently, then sink out of sight. With a terrible fear clutching at his heart, he sprang to his feet and rushed toward the spot. To stand shivering, trembling in every limb as though suddenly palsied.

A single glance told him the truth. He knew the river and its terrible vagaries far better than the majority. He had spent years of his life on or beside it.

The current had changed, and was now steadily gnawing away at the head of the bar, eating the wet sand out from under the roots of the young willows, until the weight above tore them free from their fellows, to sink helplessly into the maw of the yellow flood.

For a few minutes he stood helpless, stupefied. Shivering violently as each bit of green yielded

to the hungry monster. Cowering as his aching eyes saw a line of dark sand melt from the bar to his right or his left.

It needed not a second glance to show him that the river was falling, but that gave him no comfort. It is when the waters look concave when viewed from near their own level, when the river clings to its banks as though loth to recede from its prey, that the great streams are the most to be dreaded.

With a low, shivering cry, the wretched man rushed to the edge of the bar, entering the water as though about to end all at a plunge, or else to seek safety by swimming to the land. But only to turn back when the swift waters wet his waist; for he felt the sand crumble beneath his feet, and instinctively knew that another step would carry him past his depth, over the "step-off," which the changed current was rapidly deepening below the surface.

With a sickening sense of despair, he staggered to the highest point of the bar, sinking in a nerveless heap on the still dry sands. Escape by wading or swimming was impossible in that crazy current.

Whatever the crime that led to his being marooned, his punishment was surely enough to make amends as the hours wore on; as he watched his little refuge steadily growing less and less; as he watched the remorseless waters eating away the bar bit by bit.

Already he could calculate the length of grace allowed him. If those hours should elapse without a steamboat's heaving in sight! If no kindly ears should catch and respond to his wild, frenzied screams for help!

Until his eyes ached and turned half-blind did he strain them up and down the river, looking for the black smoke above the dense lines of forest trees to tell of a coming boat. Until his throat grew dry and parched, until his lungs failed him, until his voice turned to a husky gurgle, did he shout and scream for help on the terribly faint chance of attracting the attention of some hunter or woodcutter on either shore.

He would sink to the sand, his face upraised to the sky, moaning and gasping, cursing and trying to pray, all in a breath, only to start up once more, hoping against hope.

It was hard to watch the steady crawling nigh of death—and such a lingering, horrible death as this!

If he could only see a smoke! If there would come an answer to his maddened screams from the far-away forest! If he could only swim, even in the slightest degree!

That would be a chance for life, however frail. That would give him a few minutes, a few seconds, even! more of life, when the cruel waters had swallowed up his last foothold!

Or if a log—a stick, even—would only drift within reach!

Always to this did his thoughts return, for reason told him that any other hope of rescue was wild and visionary. Always to this—and again would his prayers and maledictions be strangely mingled as he saw the logs, the skeleton trunks, the still green trees go swiftly floating past his refuge; one and all beyond his reach!

So often was he disappointed—so often did it seem as though one of these trees, large enough to support a score men of his weight, was heading straight for the head of the disappearing island, only to veer aside and rush past out of reach—that he crept to the very edge of the willows, fancying that the current must be changing again; only to creep away from the crumbling verge with a gasping, despairing groan of utter misery and disappointment.

The current seemed to strike the towhead with its concentrated powers, giving a low, sullen muttering as it gnawed at the roots of the young growth, changing to a grim gurgle as another mouthful was eaten away. And divided by the bar, the current swept around to join again at the tail of the little island, swirling and eddying, lapping up the wet sands with increasing greediness, making its remorseless way even more rapidly than at the head.

Still no echo from the distant woods. Still no glad beacon of black smoke up or down the river. All was silent as death, save for the faint muttering of the hungry flood, or the sullen splash that came floating across the watery waste from a section of earth, or a mighty tree, that, undermined by the river, sent the yellow waters high into the air as it fell.

Again and again the maroon was disappointed as a tree or log swept past him, almost within arm's length. If he could only swim!

Then, hardly daring to breathe, so intense were his hopes and fears, he crept to the very edge of the towhead, watching with wild eagerness the coming of a great tree with barkless arms and projecting roots. It was slowly swinging around in the current, and looked as though it might lodge fairly across the head of the island.

A shivering groan burst from his white lips as he saw the trunk give a start, partly rolling over as one of its buried branches struck bottom heavily, checking the top, but permitting the root to swing rapidly around.

He tried to cry out—to pray that the branch

might give way before the harm was completed—but he could not utter a sound. He could only watch, dying as it seemed to him in those awful seconds. And then, as the roots swept around still more rapidly, even passing a straight line with the current, his head drooped, and a choking groan welled up in his throat.

It had seemed so certain that the tree would lodge across the head of the island. So certain that he would be able to gain a support on its mighty trunk before the bar was entirely eaten away. And now—

He lay on his face, moaning, and suffering worse than death by anticipation. And while his face was thus hidden, the tree tore loose from its sandy moorings, sweeping swiftly down with the current, veering just enough to clear the bar, though one of its gaunt arms extended high enough and far enough to sweep over the towhead, fairly brushing the tops of the wind-bent willows!

He heard the sound, and sprang to his feet with an uncertain grasp at the weather-bleached limb. But he was too late! Almost before he realized the truth, the chance had escaped him!

With an almost vicious growl of despair, he plunged forward, the crumbling sand sinking beneath his weight, hurling him into the water. He sunk below the surface, to rise again, gasping and trying to scream out in his agony of fear.

He struggled to reach the tree, but the treacherous current whirled him around, turning him over and filling his mouth with its muddy mixture. A choking cry—then the eddying swirl swept him around the tail of the island, turning him into a circling pool, from whence—he could never explain how—he crawled once more to the bar, dropping on its highest point with a panting sigh.

And bit by bit the sullen river devoured the bar.

CHAPTER II.

TOP-SAWYER SAM, THE RIVER SPORT.

THE good boat, "Old Hickory," Waters, master, bound for New Orleans and intermediate points, was steadily making its way down river, one bright spring day in the last decade before the Civil War.

Though the river was at a falling stage, there was no lack of water in the channel, and good though the boat's reputation was for making quick trips, this bade fair to break its record. And, as a matter of course, all connected with the vessel were in good humor over this admitted probability.

There was a long stretch to make before reaching a landing, and there was little work to be done in the office. The mid-day meal was just over, and though the bar was fairly patronized, it was yet too early in the day for Social Hall to put on its customary livery of comfort and interest.

Yet one of the card-tables was occupied; had been occupied, with only a brief interval for dinner, by three persons, before whom lay a little pile of coin and paper money, in whose hands slipped and rustled bits of painted paste-board.

Elegant West, the languid—when no business was rushing—clerk, was lazily watching these three players through his half-closed lids, a lazy smile curling his red lips as the words crossed them:

"Hawk or pigeon, Sam? I took it for the last, but—"

"That's right where you fooled yourself, mate," laughed the man to whom this query was addressed, who leaned with easy grace against the polished counter opposite, one high heel hitched over the iron foot-rest, both elbows bent back until they were supported by the bar.

A handsome fellow enough, too, though his garb would look odd enough in the eyes of our more modern "sports."

Tall, broad-shouldered, full-chested, trim-waisted, long-limbed, admirably displayed by the close-fitting trowsers, strapped under his polished boots.

With hair as yellow as corn silk, worn long and with the ends just curling a bit, pushed back of his ears and falling over the high collar of his black broadcloth coat. With silk hat on his head, tall of crown and narrow of brim, with long nap smoothly brushed.

His face was smooth-shorn, oval in contour, clean-cut in profile, the features being almost classic in repose, but when lit up by a smile that curled the thin red lips and made the large gray eyes sparkle and dance, they lost their usual severity in a wild, reckless good-humor that gave their owner a reputation as wide as the river was long.

He left the bar and passed over to the rail against which Elegant West was leaning, his eyes roving through the glass partition beyond which the three men were gambling.

"You know them, then?" murmured the clerk, hiding a yawn behind a white, many-ringed hand, faint curiosity in his voice and eyes.

A low, mellow laugh preceded the reply:

"I can't lie, though the temptation is strong."

I do know them, and little good of the lot at that!"

Elegant West picked up a little at this, gazing closer, more keenly, at the trio, as though trying to recognize them.

One of the trio was short and slender in frame, his back bent, his chest hollow. He was clad in somber black from top to toe, and were his garments alone taken into account, he might easily have passed for a broken-down preacher of the Gospel. Broken down, for though whole, his suit was rusty, shining at each seam, and polished at each curve.

But there was little of the minister of the Gospel to be seen in his thin, fox-like visage, in his keen, covetous eyes, yellow almost as his wrinkled, parchment-like skin. And his harsh, creaking voice was far too glib in card terms for a minister.

The two men with whom he was playing were of less peculiar appearance. They might have been country merchants or planters on a moderate scale, from their garb, but, if so, their hands showed small signs of hard work in either occupation.

"If hawks, they've never made Old Hickory their roost before," at length observed Elegant West. "I never forget a face—"

"Or hardly ever," laughed his companion, softly. "Still, you're half right. Those two gentlemen have deserted their usual haunts, for some reason, and you're hardly to be congratulated on the change."

"Who are they, then?"

"A couple of the lower flight, you might call them. Smart in their own fashion, no doubt, though they're apt to stoop to carrion at odd spells. By no means an honor to the profession, if I do say it!"

Elegant West smiled blandly, no little respect mixing with his glance and words as he made reply:

"Who has a better right than Top-Sawyer Sam? There's not a sporting man on the river but is ready and willing to doff his hat to you as king of the profession."

A brief shadow crept over that handsome face at this speech, and for a moment it seemed as though the flush in his cheeks was born of shame or remorse. But only for a second. Then, with a soft laugh and a bright flash in his gray eyes, Top-Sawyer Sam replied:

"And it is better to be king among beggars than a beggar among kings? You're right, mate! The boys have given me the title of their own free will, and I'll live up to it the best I know how! When I can't be king, I'll creep out of sight and hearing. Until then—but those fellows in yonder?"

"I can't place them, though, since you've given me the hint, I almost fancy I've seen that long legged varlet before."

"You have, if you ever met a nimble-fingered rascal called Green Clay," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam.

Elegant West frowned, seemingly little pleased as he steadily stared at the tall gambler through the glass.

"That scoundrel?" he muttered, hardly, his white hands closing tightly. "I thought he was doing time down the river."

"So he was, but—well," with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders, "you know who went on his bond? The same gentleman secured his pardon, and turned him free to—who knows? Possibly to make enough to pay all expenses!"

"And the others?"

"The fellow with the green coat is his mate, Luke Shortlip, a bird out of the same nest."

"I've heard of him, and nothing to his credit at that," nodded the clerk, now seeming wide awake. "Well, they'll make precious little over expenses on this trip, if I can help it. I'll drop a flea in the lug of that angel they're trying to pluck, and—"

He stopped short with a quick glance into the face of the laughing River Rex.

"One of the angels who took a tumble with Prince Lucifer, then, dear boy," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam.

"Who is he? You know him? Surely he's not one of the river men?"

"But still a bit of a shark, after his own fashion, my boy," nodded the gambler, smiling softly as he watched the players beyond. "Or, I might better say, a sort of pilot-fish to the sharks, which comes a little nearer his caliber. A lawyer's clerk, in brief."

Elegant West seemed at rifle subdued, but nodded doggedly:

"Shark or no shark, those two rascals sha'n't fleece him on this boat, if I can help it. Of course they're both playing against him, and helping each other."

"For all of which they haven't burst their pockets, I'm thinking. I've been keeping an eye on the fellows, and though I've no particular love for the little scrub, or any of his class, I've made up my mind to pluck the hawks of every feather they gain on this trip, if only to do what I can to drive them out of the business. It is just such speculators as they that brings our class into general disrepute."

Cold and hard sounded the words, and Top Sawyer Sam looked stern enough to match his tones. Save at rare and brief intervals, he was

really proud rather than ashamed of the precarious, dubious profession which he followed apparently from choice.

In some respects Samuel Cary was an enigma, even to those who thought they knew him best. He had legions of those who called him friend, but he had no actual intimate among his fellows. Not one of them all, on sober thought, could say that they positively knew him. Not one of them all could say where or of whom he was born. Not one could point out a single item of his past life, before he took to the river as a professional gambler.

Yet it was only on sober reflection that one who associated with him would be likely to recall this fact. For of all men, Top-Sawyer Sam seemed to be the least secretive and reserved.

He was known wherever cards were played, on the river or in the cities, and though he had the reputation of being a remarkably lucky player, he was welcomed wherever he went. If he won, he was also free-handed and generous to a fault.

Unlike the majority of gamblers, he sought no advantage over others by traveling in disguise or under another name. He never sat down to a game without letting his name or profession be known, and it was not the least of his peculiarities that he preferred to play with professionals rather than with richer amateurs.

"One may secure a richer crop of feathers, perhaps, but there's more sport in plucking a hawk or an eagle!" he was wont to say.

Elegant West allowed his brows to clear at this speech.

"If you have marked them, that lets me out, of course," he nodded. "But, what if they refuse to buckle at your invitation?"

"Are they ready to turn monks?" smiled Top-Sawyer Sam. "They may make up wry faces, but they'll never refuse a banter from my lips, if given. That I'll have to give it, is not so sure, though! They've picked up a mighty crooked stick in Farrington Mobbs now, I tell you."

"A lawyer's clerk, you say?"

"From St. Louis. I've seen him there frequently, and one day chance brought me into pretty close contact with the skinny fox—not that I suppose he remembers me. He had less reason for marking me than I had him, and it was a good many years ago. Time hasn't made any outward improvement in Mobbs, but I reckon I've altered a good bit. Anyway, I've taken care to cross his bows several times since starting, and he's made no signs of recognition."

"He handles the papers as though he understood them."

"Oh, Farry Mobbs is a regular sport!" laughed Sam, with a peculiar ring in his voice that caused Elegant West to glance quickly if furtively into his handsome face. "I'm bound to see that he comes out of the racket with a full suit of feathers. Not that I love him so much, mind you, dear boy, but because I love those carrion crows very much less!"

"I'll hold your hat, and say 'th nk you' into the bargain," said the clerk, still watching the game beyond with growing curiosity. "It's getting warm, in yonder! Either they've run in a cold deck on the little fellow, or else they're trying to bluff him on pure cheek!"

Top-Sawyer Sam made no immediate reply, though he was smiling after a cold, hard fashion as he watched the progress of the game. Though he could not see the hands, or even hear the words which accompanied each bet, he could readily follow the changes, thanks to his thorough knowledge of card-playing.

Each man had placed his hand, folded and concealed as much as possible, on the table before him, and each in turn was betting briskly. Already there was a snug little pile of coin and notes in the center of the table, and as yet no one showed signs of losing nerve.

"He's gritty, if he is little and skinny," muttered the King, as he watched, unconsciously straightening up and approaching the door.

Already his hand was on the knob, when the crisis came.

Betting ceased, and there was a show of cards. Farrington Mobbs thrust one hand toward the stakes, when it was knocked rudely aside, and an angry voice cried out sharply:

"You infernal swindler! take that!"

A heavy blow sent the lawyer's clerk reeling back, to fall in a heap on the floor, while his assailant leaped up, knife in hand.

CHAPTER III.

BEAUTY IN THE SADDLE.

"DEED I hain't, Miss Berfine. 'Deed I hain't 'shamed nor nuffin'. Couldn't he'p it, noways, nohow!" and the frosty pow wagged solemnly, the owl eyes vainly trying to make amends for the unwonted limppness and unsteadiness of the gaunt, still powerful figure.

Berthine Tempest quickly averted her face for an instant, lest her dusky guardian should detect the growing laughter in her dark eyes. Despite her grave reproof on discovering the sad condition of Uncle Zero, shocking alike to her sense of propriety and her memory of his almost ascetic religion, there was something

very near the ridiculous in the bearing and looks of the old negro who acted as her escort to and from Vicksburg.

"You couldn't help getting—help drinking to excess, Uncle Zero?" she exclaimed, her dark brows arching in surprise.

Uncle Zero nodded so vigorously that he almost pitched from the saddle, deftly turning the mishap into a profound bow, then drawing his gaunt figure rigidly erect as he entered upon his justification.

"'Deed I jes' couldn't he'p doin' ob it, Miss Berfine, fo' de credit ob de fambly—no I couldn't, honey, noways, nohow! Yo' bin acquainted wid Unc' Zero fo' long time, honey, but yo' nebbah see him hog-drunk fo' dis yer' time—enty?"

"Which makes my surprise all the greater, Uncle Zero," with forced gravity that was proof against even that ludicrous owliness.

Uncle Zero gravely bowed his approval.

"Dat show Uncle Zero ain't usen to git drunk, enty, Miss Berfine?"

"I said drinking, not drunk, remember," with a faint smile.

"Tek mighty nigh de same lettahs fo' 'pell dem two words, reckon, Miss Berfine," smothering a low chuckle under a pretense at coughing, then resuming his former rigidity. "Unc' Zero know what drunk look like, dese many yeah; know how he come mighty nigh feelin' too, dis day!"

Berthine's jetty eyes danced again as she caught these last words, mumbled in an aside which the old servant never intended for other ears than his own. After all, there was little harm done, and her first surprise, her first mortification, was rapidly dying away.

Uncle Zero had held a stiff rein over himself until they were fairly out of the city, on their way to Randolph Place, from which Berthine Tempest had ridden that afternoon for the purpose of making a few feminine purchases in town. As usual when she took the saddle, old Uncle Zero followed close in her wake, as escort and groom combined.

As her shopping would consume some little time, Berthine, as she was accustomed to do, bade Uncle Zero take her horse to the hotel, and there await her coming. When ready to return home, she found Uncle Zero in readiness—and in liquor as well!

It was the first time he had sinned under her very eyes, at least, and the discovery was far from being an agreeable one. Until that day Uncle Zero had seemed propriety and prudence personified; more an old friend than a servant, black though his skin was.

Perhaps it was this unexpected shock that kept Berthine coldly silent until the city was left safely behind them. Perhaps it was a memory of the faces which she had barely caught a glimpse of, within the hotel, watching Uncle Zero as he gravely assisted her to mount her spirited steed. A half-angry flush leaped into her cheeks as she recalled the smiling faces, believing those smiles to be called up by the intoxication of her groom, and hence it was that she, for probably the first time in her life, sharply reproved Uncle Zero for his weakness.

Even as the words crossed her red-ripe lips, Berthine regretted them, for she knew how dearly Uncle Zero loved and revered her; how she had been his pet in early childhood, before the frosts lay so thickly upon his woolly head; how deeply he would suffer at her lightest frown or word of displeasure even in those childish days.

But surprise took the place of regret as she saw Uncle Zero receive her reproof with meek proudness—if such a combination be at all admissible—instead of bowing his head in abashed grief. It really seemed as though he was proud of his getting drunk.

"You knew it was wrong, Uncle Zero," she persisted, more from a desire to see how the old fellow would excuse himself than from remaining displeasure. "And knowing this—knowing that mother intrusted me to your care and guardianship—"

She choked down a merry laugh as the negro stiffened in his saddle, clapping one hand to the huge butt of a rusty horse-pistol that showed in the bearskin-flapped holster before him, casting a frowning glance around them before uttering:

"Enty yo' safe, missee? Enty Unc' Zero done fetched yo' back safe f'om town? Enty Unc' Zero done gwine blow brains out ob any rascals dat dar' fo' mek eben a crooked look dis yer' way?"

"But all that will hardly excuse your falling from grace, Uncle, and particularly when on duty as now," persisted Berthine.

"Had to, Miss Berfine!" with grim doggedness, in his eagerness to justify his failing, permitting his horse to carry him almost alongside his beautiful young mistress. "It come 'bout dish yer' way, missee," his voice dropping to a confidential note as he bent over, marking off his sentences with a horny forefinger upon his other palm.

"Unc' Zero wait fo' missee dar at hotel—tavern, I calls 'um! Unc' Zero wait. Young gen'lemen come, bimeby. Dey know Unc' Zero. Dey know who him missee am, too!"

Berthine flushed, and a sparkle of real anger leaped into her jetty eyes as she sharply interposed:

"You did not venture to discuss your mistress with those gentlemen, of course?"

"Nebbah 'cuss nuffin', honey!" with an owlish wag of his frosty paw. "Nebbah no 'casion fo' cussin'. Dem gen'lemen pow'ful 'spectful, honey. No pore white trash dah—no—um! Dar was young—"

Berthine sent her horse ahead with a spiteful lash as she said:

"Never mind their names. I do not want to hear anything about them. And you, Uncle Zero—silence would better become you, I think, at least until the fumes of bad whisky die out sufficiently from your brain for you to realize the words your tongue utters."

Uncle Zero made no reply, but as he resumed his accustomed place in the rear his head was drooping, his figure bowed as though under the weight of his idolized young mistress's displeasure.

Berthine saw this, and her kind heart reproached her. Enigmatical as the manner of the old slave was, she knew there must be some good excuse for his actions, good from his standpoint at least.

For a short distance she rode on in silence, but then she yielded to that mute reproach, and slackened her pace, laughing over one dainty shoulder:

"Are you sufficiently punished, Uncle Zero? Will you ever sin again in like manner?"

The ghost of a smile lit up the wrinkled face, and the gaunt figure grew more erect, but there was the same curious note in the voice that made reply.

"Couldn't he'p it, Miss Berfine. W'en dem young gens say fo' me drink to de long life an' good healf ob my missee, what Unc' Zero gwine fo' do but drink?"

A frown came into that darkly beautiful countenance as her suspicions were thus confirmed, and there was a haughty echo to her tone as she sharply replied:

"Say to them that I have forbidden your touching liquor. Say to them that no man with a drop of gentle blood in his veins would be cowardly and base enough to couple the name of a lady with such a clumsy jest!"

More the indignant young lady probably would have said, only for the rapid trampling of hoofs along the road over which they had just passed. A backward glance showed her a single horseman riding toward them, sitting his spirited steed with the ease and grace of a natural equestrian. The same glance assured her that he was a stranger, and more to conceal her anger-flushed cheeks than aught else, Berthine drew the veil further over her face as she turned her horse to one side of the road to permit the horseman to pass them by without trouble or crowding.

Uncle Zero gazed backward, as well as his mistress, but for the first few moments he could not have told a stranger from his own brother, so stunned and surprised was he by that unexpected outburst. Even now he could not understand why his young mistress should take such a different view of the matter. Surely he was in duty bound to drink her good health, even at the risk of becoming grossly intoxicated!

The horseman slackened his pace as he overtook them, doffing his hat with a respectful bow to the veiled lady, and seemingly on the point of addressing her, when Berthine quickly averted her face.

Just the suspicion of a flush came into his swarthy face, and even his brilliant eyes told how readily he interpreted that movement. But there was nothing to betray his annoyance in his voice as he addressed Uncle Zero:

"Your pardon, Uncle, but as a stranger in this region, may I ask you for a little information?"

"Feel proud to sarbe yo', sah," bowed the old negro, uncovering.

"I wish to find a gentleman named Morgan—Theobald Morgan, who owns a plantation out in this direction, if I have not gone astray?"

"Dis de yight road, sah," bowed Uncle Zero, keenly though covertly inspecting the stranger while tersely adding the necessary directions.

There was nothing unpleasant for him to discover, for this stranger was a really good-looking fellow, after a certain fashion.

Not tall, but with a goodly breadth of shoulder and massiveness of limb. Dark to swarthy in face, as though much of his life had been passed many degrees nearer the equator, with eyes that seemed to be black, but with a peculiar greenish sheen as the sunlight struck across them. With jetty hair, cut close to his large, well-shaped skull, and smooth-shorn face. With clothes of stylish cut and fine material, though the long-topped riding-boots looked rather odd in the eyes of the critical old negro.

His voice was deep and full, with a firm, manly ring to it that fell pleasantly on the listening ear; so pleasantly that Berthine felt forced to steal a sidelong glance at the speaker through her veil, only to turn away again with a quick flush, as she saw that, though talking to Uncle Zero, this stranger was watching his young mistress.

Did the stranger intercept her glance? At any rate, he bowed, as he thanked Uncle Zero for his information, then touched his horse with the

spurs that armed his heels, dashing rapidly along the road.

A stranger, beyond a doubt, but one well worth a second glance, Berthine Tempest mentally decided as she lifted her veil and watched the receding horseman. A good and graceful rider, sitting his horse easily yet firmly, looking well from the rear; that most critical point of observation, too.

"Nebbah see him afo', dat I 'member ob," ventured Uncle Zero, with a furtive glance into the face of his young mistress. "No pore white trash 'bout dem—'deedy not!"

Berthine gave a little start at the sound of his voice, and a faint flush came into her telltale cheeks. She felt a strange interest in this stranger, and she feared that she had betrayed as much to the keen eyes of her groom. And with a touch of her gloved hand, she dropped the veil again, touching up her willing steed and riding on a little more briskly.

Whether or no Uncle Zero rightly interpreted this action, he was not too drunk to take the hint, and plodded along in the dust cast up by her horse in silence, his wrinkled face lugubriousness itself. He felt that he was in disgrace with his idolized mistress, and for many moments he kept racking his brain for a real or a fictitious excuse.

Then—two men suddenly sprung from the bushes which lined the road, grasping the startled horses by their heads, uttering savage oaths and vicious threats. And as Uncle Zero strove to jerk his pistol from its holster, a heavy stroke from a knotted club hurled him bleeding from the saddle.

With an indignant cry, Berthine drew a pistol and fired.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAWKS AND THE DOVE.

Fired point-blank at the grim, blackened face of the rascal who held her frightened steed in subjection with one strong hand, while with the other he was trying to drag her from the saddle.

"Don't you be a durn fool, pritty gal!" he was growling, with a vicious show of his teeth. "Don't you split that dainty throat a-yelpin' fer help that can't git here in time to block the game we're playin', or it'll come all the harder onto— Curse ye fer a panther!"

By a swift combination of hand and head he foiled her shot, ducking with one and striking her hand aside with the other, causing the lead to go astray and expend its force on the trees beyond.

Then, with an angry curse, he slipped an arm through the reins, using both hands to tear the maiden from her saddle, just as his mate came rushing to his assistance, having effectually disposed of Uncle Zero.

"Ketch the boss, lubber-legs!" grated the ruffian, as the frightened animal almost tore his left arm free from the helpless maiden. "You make sure o' the two critters, will ye?"

With rapid dexterity, combined with no mean degree of strength, the other ruffian obeyed, leaving his mate to stifle the cries of mingled fear and terror which Berthine Tempest was sending forth, as she struggled frantically to break away from his crushing embrace.

"Ef you won't take a hint, you kin take t'other thing, critter!" growled the ruffian, his evil eyes all aglow as he pressed a broad, dirty palm over her parted lips, at the same time tightly compressing her nostrils with thumb and forefinger. "Simmer down, an' I'll treat ye like a dozen ladies rolled up into one. Keep on kickin', an' I know who'll get the wust o' the deal!"

"Don't shet off her wind, Dick!" warningly cried his mate, now engaged in quieting the two animals. "It ain't cold meat the boss has sent us to rake in, mind ye!"

"You do your part, Hump, an' I'll tend to mine," with a surly growl, as he strode toward the bushes from whence they had sprung their ambushade. "Git them critters under kiver, then take a look at the nigger fore he comes a trick onto ye."

In vain Berthine Tempest struggled against the ruffian's grasp. He held her as in a vice, and her face was rapidly turning an ugly purple beneath that remorseless gag as he bore her from the road into the cooler shade of the wood.

"Ef I only hed a bit o' glass fer to stick up afore the two eyes o' ye, honey," grinned the rascal, as he slackened his brutal grasp, permitting her to catch a much needed breath of air, "you'd git heap more sense into ye, I reckon! Rather be tuck captive double times over without kicking once, then to make a holy show of yourself like ye be now."

Berthine shivered, but made no reply. A faint thrill ran through her frame, but that was all. Her strength had fled, and she lay an almost lifeless weight upon his arm.

Something like terror crept into the bloodshot eyes that gazed keenly into her face, the ruffian fumbled hastily into his pocket, producing a bottle of amber-hued liquor, with a portion of which he lavishly bathed her face, despite her faint struggles to escape the infliction.

"'Twon't do ye a mite o' harm, honey," he grunted, with a return of confidence as he saw how rapidly her strength was returning.

"'Tain't nothin' wuss then old whisky, pure as honey, an' s'archin' as a constable with a warrant!"

While he was thus engaged, his companion brought both horses into cover, hitching them hard by, then returning and lifting the still insensible Uncle Zero from the dust, carrying him across a broad shoulder to the same spot. Panting from the exertion he growled to his mate:

"No time to waste in idle chatter, Dick! That fellow who rode past us a while ago may have heard the shot, and—"

"So much the wuss fer him ef he's fool enough to come nosin' back this way fer to find out what sort o' game was fired at," grinned the gaunt ruffian, with a vicious shake of his shaggy head.

Still the warning was not altogether lost on him, for his movements quickened and he deftly tied a soiled handkerchief over the lips of his fair captive.

"Wouldn't think o' sech a thing ef you wasn't a woman, honey," he grinned, facetiously. "Wouldn't think of it ef you didn't hev no bell-clapper in them pretty jaws o' yours. Mought pull it out—but that would hurt heap wuss then this, I reckon!"

"Business, mate!" frowned his companion, brushing the drops of sweat from his brow, brought forth by the exertion necessary before he could lift the limp figure of Uncle Zero into the saddle, stopping to catch breath before binding the negro in position. "You talk too much with your mouth. Git down to business! We're too mighty nigh the road for our good health, I reckon!"

"I'll be ready as soon as you are, Stumpy," with an impatient nod.

He lifted Berthine into her own saddle, passing a strong thong about her waist and tying her to the pommel with the other end.

Uncle Zero, just now beginning to recover from that dastard blow, was secured in much the same manner, then, each rascal leading a horse, the captives were borne away deeper into the wood.

A savage threat effectually gagged Uncle Zero when his consciousness fairly returned, and Berthine, almost suffocated by the vile rag which closely compressed her lips, was unable to utter a sound.

"We ain't doin' of all this jest fer fun, mind ye," grinned the gaunt rascal who answered to the name of Dick, twisting a glance over his shoulder as he uttered the words. "We ain't givin' no chances away ef we knows it, an' so we warns ye good: you yelp out, either of ye, afore the time comes when we says your jaws kin wag, an' you'll hear somethin' drop, with a mighty dull thud—yes you jes' will, now!"

Despite this, the ruffians did not seem particularly in haste. They made fair progress, but came to a halt much sooner than might have been expected considering the nature of the outrage which they were perpetrating, and the penalty to be expected in case of discovery.

"I reckon this is plenty fur!"

"Reckon it'll do," nodded Hump, coming to a halt with a keen and comprehensive glance about them.

There was little to be seen save surrounding trees and leafy bushes, though they had come to a halt in a small open space.

"It'll be night afore the gal is missed, an' by that time we'll be all hunk," nodded Dick, as he hitched the horse which he had been leading, then released Berthine from the saddle.

Hump also secured the animal of which he had charge, cutting the cord that held Uncle Zero to the saddle, then rudely tumbling him to the ground. The negro scrambled to his feet, fairly boiling over with indignation, only to shrink away from an ugly-looking pistol whose muzzle stared him full in the face.

"Simmer down, dark!" chuckled the squat, fat rascal, an ugly smile playing about his thick lips and a dangerous glow in his little pig eyes as they glanced over the leveled tube. "I've got better use for you than killing, but if I have to do it—you understand?"

"Let missy go—do what yo' like wid me, but let her go!" huskily muttered the faithful old fellow even as he shrank tremblingly back.

"Your missy is right enough if those who can will take the pains and trouble to get her out of this little predicament," blandly responded Hump, pushing Uncle Zero back until his heels caught on a root, bringing him to the ground with more speed than comfort. "You stay put while we do the talking, will you?"

To make sure that he was obeyed the squat ruffian tied the old servant's hands behind his back, hitching the ends of the rope to a slender tree-trunk; then turning toward Berthine, who was watching their movements with fear and anger struggling for the upper hand in her brain and heart.

"It's pure business, you want to understand, ma'am," smiled the fat rascal, his face strangely streaked where the sweat had partially washed off the smut which served as a disguise. "We don't like to inconvenience you even this much, and it would fill our hearts with awful grief should circumstances cause us to treat you still worse. And if it should come to such

a pass that we'd have to slit that dainty throat—"

"Ears first, mate, you know," grinned Dick, maliciously.

"Don't talk of it, friend," with an affected horror as he averted his face, waving a dumpy hand in deprecation.

"Business is business, an' you'll never git thar ef I let you wag the tongue o' ye as you gin'ally do," grumbled Dick, scowling. "It's clean business, an' mighty few words kin set the programme out clear enough fer even a skeered gal to take in the main p'int. *Git thar!*"

"You're so hasty—so disagreeably blunt, Dick," mumbled Hump, with a reproachful glance over his shoulder as he unknotted the kerchief which confined the lips of their fair captive. "But since you're so bent on having it your own way—listen, ma'am!"

Tossing the kerchief to Dick, he dropped to the ground before the maiden, speaking rapidly, clearly, plainly enough to all conscience:

"As mate says, ma'am, this is pure business. We're only deck-hands, carrying out the orders of our captain. Never mind his name; all that can interest you is his purpose.

"That is to put money in his pocket, by foul means if fair ones fail him. He has seen you. He knows that your friends will put up a right smart lump of gold rather than have any harm come to you. And so—as the shortest method, he set up to dragging his net.

"We watched our chance, and caught you, first haul. Having done so much, the rest is easy enough to men of our caliber. Just to give you the idea in the rough—listen, once more:

"We'll wait here until pretty well along in the day, then give Uncle a bit of writing to take to your friends. That writing will set forth the terms of your ransom; the price demanded, and the manner of payment, the transfer, etc."

"An' ef they's any tricks tried to be put up onto us, *you'll* be the one to suffer, mind ye, pritty gal," growled Dick, rising and taking out a pipe and plug of tobacco, preparing for a smoke.

"Not through our will, mind you," blandly amended Hump, an ugly smile on his streaked countenance. "The captain has laid out the line for us to follow, and we've no choice of our own. He says the ransom must be paid, without higgling or hagaling on the part of your friends. If there is any delay, we must clip an ear, and send it to them as a gentle remonstrance against dilatoriness. If that does not spur them to immediate action—but I needn't say more!"

An affected shudder shook his fat figure, and he partially averted his face, thus failing to note the glad light which so suddenly leaped into the face of his captive.

Berthine had not ventured to interrupt the oily rascal during his brutal speech—all the more brutal from being so thinly veiled with affected tenderness of heart. She was bravely striving to collect her shaken nerves, and dared not venture a look into either of those hideous countenances, all the more repulsive from the sweat-streaked smut that disguised them.

If only aid would come! But from whence? Reason would tell her how baseless was this hope. And yet—almost unconsciously her mind would revert to the stranger who had passed them on the road but a short time before their capture by these two ruffians.

And even as that thought came to her, her heart gave a wild, almost suffocating bound into her throat!

Surely she could not be mistaken! Surely that was a human being stealing through the shrubbery toward them! Surely—it was! She now caught a fair glimpse of the face—the face of that same stranger!

The fat ruffian seemed to catch sight of the same object a moment later, for he sprang to his feet with a warning cry to his comrade.

"Cover, Hump!" he spluttered, diving into the shrubbery; but the gaunt ruffian showed more courage, leaping to Berthine, knife in hand.

"Back, you devil!" he snarled. "Back, or I'll slit her thrapple!" and his gleaming blade hovered above her head, one hand gripping her throat.

CHAPTER V.

BIRDS OF PREY.

It was an ugly blow that sent Farrington Mobbs sprawling from his seat to the floor of Social Hall, but there was something still uglier in the broad-bladed, keen-pointed weapon which Green Clay flashed from the back of his neck as he kicked aside his own chair, and half-crouched as though about to leap upon the overthrown card-player.

All the worst passions of a thoroughly evil man were painted upon his livid countenance, just then, and had there come no interference, a few seconds later would almost surely have found his hands red with the blood of a fellow-being.

Top-Sawyer Sam flung the door wide, striding through the opening, and uttering a sharp, commanding cry as he advanced:

"Steady as you are, stranger! Show your license for turning Old Hickory into a slaughter-house, won't you?"

With a snarl that showed his teeth after a

wolfish fashion, the infuriated gambler flashed a glance toward the speaker, who was coolly advancing with a smile upon his lips, a mocking laugh in his eyes. For one moment it seemed as though he would still make his death-leap. For one moment the glittering steel quivered in his sinewy grasp.

Top-Sawyer Sam smiled more broadly. And a white hand came away from his breast, where it had been supported by a thumb in his vest sleeve, and a slender finger quivered in the air to emphasize the warning:

"Really, I don't think you can afford it, my dear fellow. Sorry to interfere with your little amusements, but—I've bought the privilege of playing surgeon on Old Hickory, *this* trip."

Green Clay flashed a vicious scowl toward the speaker, whose tones were so smooth, so languid, even, but whose manner and looks were far more irritating than the loudest bluster.

"Who called on you? No man can cheat me at cards and—"

"It's a lie!" spluttered Farrington Mobbs, scrambling to his feet, clapping a hand to his hawk-like nose, and giving vent to a muffled howl of mingled rage and pain as he saw the red blood that so freely followed the gambler's blow.

"You hear the cur?" grated the gambler, his face turning fairly purple with rage and hatred.

"Out of the way, *you!* I'll split—"

With a swift stride Top-Sawyer Sam stood between the two men, that careless smile changing to one of icy coldness, the laugh in his big gray eyes turning to a steady fire that seemed to scorch the enflamed countenance upon which it rested.

His hands were still empty, and he did not even seem to think it necessary to prepare them to serve as a guard against the gleaming blade which now appeared to threaten his life, instead. And, as he heard the quick tramping of feet as the clerk and the passengers rushed into Social Hall, he turned his face to call out:

"Give us room, gentlemen, if it isn't too much trouble!"

Elegant West uttered a sharp cry of warning:

"Ware the knife, Cary! That dirty whelp is—"

An instant later and River Rex would almost surely have felt the cold steel in his back, but he was still smiling as he wheeled to face the enraged gamester. In clear, easy tones he spoke, extending his right hand to suit his words:

"Let me look at that blade, stranger, for a moment."

"To the hilt, if you crowd me!" viciously grated the fellow, his eyes now glowing like coals of living fire. "Out of the way! Let me get at that infernal cheat, or I'll carve a path right through you!"

He looked dangerous enough, just then, and more than one of those who stood as spectators caught their breath quickly with a half-shiver as they saw how defenseless the River Rex still stood. And, as though this was not enough, Top-Sawyer Sam turned sharply toward the card-table where the second gambler was in the act of pocketing the disputed stakes, his voice ringing out cold and stern:

"Hands off, stranger! It's a tempting little pot, but *you* can't take it down until we know just who it rightly belongs to."

"It's mine—I won it fairly," cried Farrington Mobbs, as he started forward, his weazen face fairly aglow with avarice.

Green Clay, with a snarl, sprung forward, but only to be caught by the River Rex. A single twist disarmed him, and another effort sent him reeling back to the wall.

A deft flirt of the King's right hand sent the gleaming blade above his head, to stick quivering in the painted ceiling out of reach, and still with that cold, careless smile Sam spoke again:

"Much obliged, stranger! I knew you would let me have a look at that pretty bit of steel if I asked you after the proper fashion. My very best thanks for your courtesy, and—what in the name of confusion is all this row about, anyway?"

As by one impulse each of the trio began to give a version of the affair, then stopping short and glaring at each other. Top-Sawyer Sam glanced smilingly from face to face for a brief space; then the expression of his countenance grew cold and grave, even hard and fierce.

"One at a time, gentlemen, if you please," he said; then, turning to Mobbs, he added: "We'll listen to you, first; go on."

"You'll listen to a thief's excuses, then!" grated Green Clay, recovering, as a handsought another weapon.

Top-Sawyer Sam whirled toward him, white and stern, his gray eyes glowing like orbs of polished steel, his voice menacing.

"Speak when your name is called, you cur! You felt my hand a bit ago; if you feel it again, you'll not come off near so easily!"

Green Clay showed his teeth wolfishly, his fingers tightening on the checkered butt of a pistol that lay hidden beneath his vest.

"You crow mighty loud for an outsider, stranger; but I've cut the combs of many a

smarter cock than you dare claim to be! Unless you are playing shares with that foxy-faced thief, you're dipping into a game that does not concern you in the least."

The River Rex, cool as ever, retorted:

"From behind, perhaps; unless your record lies on the face of it, you never met a man on equal terms."

"You call yourself a man, don't you?" demanded Clay.

"The shadow of one, at least. My name is Sam Cary: Top-Sawyer Sam, I am sometimes called."

The gambler started back, turning pale as death, and his hand dropped from the pistol-butt as though it had suddenly grown red-hot.

"I didn't know—I wouldn't—" he stammered, chokingly.

"As I said," coldly interposed the River Rex, his red lips curling in scorn. "You lose your nerve when you try to bluff a man."

"All we want is our rights," broke in the other gambler, who still stood near the table on which lay the tempting stakes over which the gamesters had quarreled.

"You shall have them, though it ends in sending you up a tree," was the rather comfortable retort, as Sam nodded toward the last speaker. "The trouble with gentlemen of your feather is that you're not content with your own rights, but you want to have those belonging to your opponents, as well!"

"All we ask is right, and—"

"And I'm here to see that you get it," was the interposition. "You fell out over a hand at cards. Which one held the winner?"

"I did!" eagerly cried Mobbs, presenting a ludicrous spectacle, with the blood still dripping freely from his injured nose.

"And how did you get it?" demanded Green Clay, with a venomous look.

"Stole it, no doubt, just as you got yours," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, as he moved over to the table, carelessly sorting over the stakes as he added: "You admit, then, that the gentleman had the winning hand?"

"I deny it!" growled Green Clay; "I swear that he stole the hand! I swear that—look for yourself!" with a cry of exultation as he leaped forward and tore open the coat of the accused, suffering several cards to flutter to the floor.

Mobbs shrunk back, with a muffled whine, a hunted, terrified expression coming into his weazen face. He glared about him, his yellow eyes glowing, his thin lips curling back from his yellow teeth, looking still more fox-like than ordinary.

"It's a trick—a foul trick to cheat me out of my honest winnings, gentlemen!" he whined, nervously.

Green Clay laughed exultantly, for, after this exposure, he never for a moment doubted the result.

"A foul trick, sure enough, but the trickster shall come to grief! Look for yourself, Mr. Cary! Do you wonder that we kicked? Do you wonder that gentlemen should raise a row when they run afoul of a common cheat like this rascal is proven?"

"By gentlemen you mean yourself and partner, no doubt?" smiled Sam, with a peculiar twinkle to his gray eyes.

"Who dares even hint that we are *not* gentlemen?" sharply demanded the other gambler, with a show of defiance as Cary turned toward him.

"Gentlemen? *You?*" cried the River Rex, with curling lips and glowing eyes. "Ay! such gentlemen as—listen, both of you! I know you. I have kept an eye upon you ever since the boat pulled out from St. Louis, for I knew that you could not long wear the mask, and when the time should come I meant to be at hand to fully turn you up!"

"Gentlemen? Then a common thief, cheat, swindler, liar, and cowardly rascal in general is a gentleman—for you are each and all of these, Luke Shortlip. And you, Green Clay, are a fitting partner for him in all respects. You accuse this fellow of cheating you, and raise a melancholy howl about it, just as though your whole life was not a cheat and a fraud from beginning to end!"

"I never—it's a put up job to rob me, gents," snuffled Mobbs, edging covetously toward the money-laden table. "I won the stakes honestly, and they tried to murder me rather than stand the loss! They would have murdered me, only for this noble, grand, generous gentleman, who—"

With a frown of disgust Top-Sawyer Sam tapped the bloodstained lips with the back of a hand, then gingerly wiped his fingers on a snow white kerchief, tossing the cloth aside impatiently when done.

"That is about the only circumstance I regret: having to save a cringing, hypocritical rascal like you, in exposing these frauds. They have at least one excuse: they sometimes throw off the mask and openly flap their wings as carrion crows, while you—*bah!*"

Farrington Mobbs shrunk back, shivering, impelled by bodily fear to take to his heels, but restrained by the love of gold. A miserably abject-looking creature, just then; and blacklegs though all present now understood the two gam-

blers to be, the tide of sympathy was fairly turning in their direction for the moment.

"It is just such foul fingers as you two rascals carry that give excuse for the hue and cry people are beginning to raise against men who play cards," went on Top-Sawyer Sam, sternly.

"One of whom you are!" muttered Green Clay, with a forced smile on his pale face.

"If you mean by that that I am a professional gambler, I freely admit the fact," bowed the River Rex. "I am proud of being one, and it is for this very reason that I am doing my level best to drive all such carrion as you two out of the profession. Not that you really belong to it: you are no more a gambler than a buzzard is an eagle. You have the feathers, but they are not the right color. You have—"

From all appearance Top-Sawyer Sam was spreading himself with the intention of reading the two blacklegs a regular lecture on the ethics of his profession, but, just at that juncture, a startling interruption cut his speech short.

Through the speaking-tube in the office there came a hoarse, exciting summons from the pilot-house for the captain:

"On deck—lively! There's death in the river ahead!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIVER CLAIMS ITS PREY.

THE hoarse voice sent a thrill of intense excitement through the group in Social Hall, and for a few moments more than one of the passengers shrunk back, with affrighted glances about them, as though inclined to give those sepulchral notes a ghostly derivation.

Only the captain and the clerk appeared to fully comprehend the sounds, and the former, with a hurried word to Elegant West, tore open the door and made all haste to obey the summons.

In the confusion both Green Clay and Luke Shortlip moved nearer the table where still rested the prime cause of dispute, with the evident intention of securing the money; but Top-Sawyer Sam was still on guard, and one white hand thrust the gamblers aside while the other dropped upon the money, clasping the butt of a wide-mouthed pistol.

"In hock!" he cried, sharply, with a warning flash of his gray eyes from face to face, then glancing toward the clerk as he added: "One moment, West, if you please! Take charge of this filthy lucre until we can settle its ownership, will you?"

Elegant West leaped to the table, brushing the money into his hat with a hasty motion as he cried:

"For you, Cary! I wouldn't lose a moment for any other man. Tom means business when he sends a trump like that for the old man!"

Swiftly as all this had passed, the room was almost deserted by the excited, agitated passengers before the money was secured by the nimble clerk; and little marvel that such should be the case.

"There's death in the river ahead!"

Startling enough, in all conscience. Startling enough it would be, even with a full explanation attached, but doubly so from its very vagueness. Death—but in what shape?

Even while rushing pell-mell to gain the guards at the bow, each passenger instinctively tried to brace himself against—what? Some thought of a collision with another steamer. Others had a vision of a snag or sawyer with its sickening shock—its horrible ripping and tearing and grinding and grating through the timbers of the vessel. Still others—what they feared, who can say?

Elegant West leaped over the office railing, pitching hat and contents into the huge safe, thrusting the massive door shut with a sullen jar, then leaped back again to reach the guards in another wild leap.

Top-Sawyer Sam waited to see the disputed stakes placed in safety, then followed hard upon the heels of the excited clerk. His own face was a trifle paler than ordinary, but that was the only change visible to the outward eye. Not even doubt and suspense such as turned many a strong man sick and faint, could shake his steel-like nerves.

"No boat—thank Heaven for that!" panted Elegant West, a single glance relieving that dread fear—the fear that, with wheel or rudder suddenly disabled or refusing to work properly, their boat was rushing down the swift current to crash into another vessel, upward bound.

A moment's thought would have relieved this fear, since there had been no interchange of whistles; but in a moment such as this, even the most level-headed will occasionally lose their mental balance.

A sharp cry escaped the lips of Top-Sawyer Sam, as he pointed down the river to a small object in the center of the wide stream.

"Death, sure enough—but not for us!" he exclaimed, passing the clerk and leaping to the hurricane deck, where the captain was already giving the pilot some directions.

The bells below were jingling in obedience to the rapidly jerked wires, and the steamer was slowly slackening its speed, at the same time turning its nose toward the left bank of the river.

Down the river, seemingly just where the main channel was running, a tiny patch of green willows showed their heads above the muddy waters. And in their midst, clinging to their tops with one hand, while the other was wildly swinging a coat above his head, was visible a human being. And faintly there came a terrified cry for help!

"Stop the wheels and drop down with the current alone!" cried out Top-Sawyer Sam, sharply, taking in one frail hope at a single glance. "Heaven have mercy on the poor devil if our waves strike him with full force!"

"We'll do our level best, but it's mighty dubious—monstrous dubious!" muttered the captain, as he came tumbling out of the pilot-house to the hurricane deck, only saved from an awkward fall by the strong arm and ready action of the river sport.

"Drop the yawl and make a trial for it, anyway!" cried Top-Sawyer Sam, as he sent the excited captain toward the ladder with a hearty push. "We can't let the poor devil die before our very eyes without—Ha!" with a gasping breath, as he leaned forward, shading his eyes with one curved palm. "He's gone—he's swept away by the current."

So it indeed seemed, for the wildly waving garment fluttered down amidst the little patch of green willows, and the human figure sunk out of sight as though the swirling, eddying current had indeed swept him from his frail support to meet with a horrible death in its troubled waters.

But then, an instant later, Top-Sawyer Sam gave a clear, exultant yell of triumphant joy as he swung his hat high above his head.

"Hurrah! hang to it, stranger! Never say die! We'll snake you out of that, river or no river!"

Once more the poor wretch who stood in the very jaws of death was visible clinging to the remnant of willows, having regained a footing, strengthened and nerved to renewed efforts by the glad sight of coming assistance. He waved one hand in frantic urging, but only for an instant. It dropped, to clutch the frail support that seemed to tremble and shiver, as though on the very point of yielding to the sucking and glawing of the hungry waters.

The hurricane deck was now half filled by the excited passengers, crowding and jostling each other in their efforts to secure the clearest view as the head of the steamer swung steadily around in obedience to the wheel, deftly manipulated by the white-faced pilot, whose glowing eyes and grimly set jaws told how imminent he deemed the peril which menaced a fellow-being before his gaze.

Satisfied that the poor wretch had another slight hold on life, Top-Sawyer Sam sprung toward the stern of the boat, hanging over the guards, watching the men who, urged on by their captain, were preparing the yawl which hung over the rudder for launching.

Would they be in time, briskly as they worked?

Top-Sawyer Sam doubted this, as he cast a swift glance over the river, noting the curling waves which were rolling down toward the tiny bit of sand and willows, running ahead of the steamer, which was now little more than floating with the current, with its prow turned nearly upstream.

The poor wretch was still clinging to the willows, and hoarse, choked though his voice was, it could be plainly distinguished by those on board the vessel. They could even catch some of his words: prayers and implorings, pitiful cries for aid ere it should prove too late to rob the muddy waters of their prey!

"The boys are doing all they know how—but will they be in time?" muttered the River Rex, mechanically brushing the drops of perspiration from his brow, brought out by the imminent peril of another.

A strange, choking sensation came into his throat as a shrill, despairing yell came floating over the water; as he saw the poor wretch once more struggle desperately to recover his footing as the hungry waves bit off still another chunk from the almost devoured bar.

With a sickening dread at his heart, such as no peril, however great, had ever caused him to feel on his own account, Top-Sawyer Sam watched the imperiled man fighting for dear life against such terrible odds. Watched him flounder, with his feet and legs thrashing the muddy water into foam as he clung with a death-grip to the willows which alone kept him from being swept away by the waves which now swirled about the pitiful remnant of sand and roots. Watched him recover his footing, clutching the sadly-diminished willows with the energy of despair, too exhausted now to do more than glare beseechingly toward his would-be rescuers.

"If one could only be at work! only do something!" the river king muttered, huskily, fairly trembling with excitement.

If only one could! But what?

Though simply floating with the current, the steamboat was already nearly abreast the precarious refuge, and the pilot durst not signal for the engineer to start the engines again, lest the waves which would be hurled away from the mighty paddle-wheels complete the destruction of the towhead.

With the current running so swiftly, and with the boat so far from the imperiled man, almost hugging the shore, in fact, the best and most skillful of swimmers could not hope to reach the bit of green to which the poor wretch clung with a despairing grip. The current would carry him rods below the point, despite his most vigorous efforts.

"And it would be equal to suicide for a man to come within reach of the poor devil's arms, just now!" muttered Top-Sawyer Sam, as these reflections flashed across his brain.

With a shiver, he turned his gaze away from the man whom death had dallied with so long, looking over the guards to note the progress made in launching the yawl, something like an imprecation hissing through his teeth as he saw one of the deck-hands clumsily fumbling with the falls, which had in some manner become entangled so as to refuse to work freely.

This was probably caused by accident or long disusage, but it appeared to Top-Sawyer Sam in that critical moment as though it was the result of an almost criminal blundering, and acting on a fiery impulse he swung himself over the rail, dropping to the guards at the stern, then swinging himself over these at arm's length, twisting his head to guide his further progress by a glance, then dropping cat-like into the yawl beside the deck-hand.

In an instant he recovered himself and flashed forth a bright blade, intending to slash the ropes apart, but this was unnecessary. The deck-hand completed his work of disentanglement and the yawl struck the waters in safety an instant later.

"Tumble in, half a dozen of you fellows!" thundered Sam, seeming to assume command by instinct. "Lively, you crawlers! There's human life depending on your legs and arms and—Steady, my hearties! We'll fetch the poor devil out top o' the heap, even yet!"

Into the broad yawl tumbled the excited deck-hands, and the captain tossed an oar to Top-Sawyer, who caught it deftly enough, dropping in the stern like a born coxswain.

"Give way—with a will, you sinners!" he grated, as the captain cast the yawl free and it swayed to the eddying waters that came bubbling from under the steamer. "A quart of whisky and ten dollars to each man o' you all if we snatch that poor devil out of the water!"

This was a superfluous flow of words, for the men were one and all eager enough to save life without the hope of other reward, but it showed the gambler was made of the right sort of stuff, and a wild cheer burst from their lungs as they bent their backs and swept the ashens oars through the swirling waters.

Not until then had Top-Sawyer Sam dared cast a full glance toward the man whom he sought to rescue. He knew that there was a tiny patch of green still showing above the water, but that was all. Until—

An inarticulate cry broke from his lips as he arose in his seat and glared past the heads of the men at the oars. He saw the man reel and fall; saw the willows bend with his weight; saw the muddy waters splashing and curling away in waves from the heels of the desperately struggling wretch as he strove to regain his footing.

Until now the remnant of sand had held together, frail and shivering, but still with sufficient resistance to the water to afford a precarious footing; until rescue seemed almost assured, only to melt away before the treacherous waters, leaving but a few clinging roots to keep the man from drowning! And his frantic efforts were surely destroying even this frail chance for life—were tearing away the roots, one by one, until—a choking, gasping yell was cut short by the waves that closed over the head of the marooned gambler!

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESCUING KNIGHT.

BERTHINE strove to elude that vicious grasp, but the movements of the gaunt, swarthy rufian were too swift, and his choking grip cut short the cry for help that rose in her throat.

His gleaming steel hung above her head as though on the point of falling, and he flashed an ugly glance toward the stranger, now fully revealed as he came dashing toward the spot. Full of savage menace rung out the voice of the black-faced rascal:

"Hold off, critter! Chip in afore you're axed, an' I'll sweep the board ef—"

The stranger came to an abrupt halt, but it was to swing forward his right hand with a motion so swift yet steady that before the brute could realize the truth, all was over so far as he was concerned.

A puff of smoke—a sharp explosion—an awful, choking cry; then the stranger sprang through the blue smoke of his own shot, sending a second bullet in chase of the fleeing Hump, who was just vanishing from sight amid the bushes.

Poor Berthine was looking up into the dark face of the desperado who was threatening her life, and, great though her own peril had been, her eyes closed with a shiver of horror at the brute's terrible end. For the first time in her life she was called upon to see a human being

suffer a violent death, and the sight turned her weak and faint at heart.

She fell back as her brutal assailant reeled aside, but for a few moments she knew little of what was transpiring.

The stranger, with hardly a second glance after the fleeing kidnapper, sprung hurriedly to her side, catching the maiden in his arms, his bronzed face fairly livid with strong emotion as he looked for wounds or blood.

Through it all, Uncle Zero had been too horrified, to do aught save stare and strangle, until now that he saw his loved mistress fairly rescued from the hands of the brutal enemy.

"Leff me—leff me free, marse!" he spluttered, striving to break his bonds and regain his feet. "Leff de old niggah nuss de honey bird back to life ag'in, marse! Leff de—debble burn dese ropes!"

Whether it was that he now realized that the maiden had escaped an injury more serious than a thorough fright, or that he really believed Uncle Zero could attend to his young mistress better than himself, the stranger gently lowered her fainting figure to the ground, and hastened to cut the old servant free from his bonds.

"Look after her, then, Uncle," he hurriedly muttered, as he lifted the sorely agitated negro to his feet. "I don't think she was touched with the knife. It's only the fright; and that reminds me—she mustn't be forced to gaze upon that carrion first off!"

The latter words were drawn forth by a glance at the body of Dick Crump, and pushing Uncle Zero toward his young mistress, slipping into his hand a pocket flask of liquor, the stranger hastened to remove the gruesome object before the maiden should fully recover from her fainting spell.

There was a hard, stern expression upon his face, a vivid glow in his dark eyes—a glow that made them for an instant send forth a greenish luster—as he stooped over the body. There was naught of regret in face or eyes; if anything, a shade of almost fierce pleasure.

Heavy as a corpse proverbially is—and in life Dick Crump had never been classed among the lightweights—the stranger seemingly found no difficulty in dragging the carcass through the line of bushes, out of eye-range of the young lady.

When a backward glance assured him of this, he relaxed his grip, bending over the body and looking for the track of his lead.

"He never knew what hurt him!" came slowly from his lips as he noted the livid hole just above the eyes. "As true a shot as I ever made in all my life!"

He drew erect, and seemed on the point of turning back to the little glade, when a sudden impulse appeared to check him. A moment of hesitation, then he stooped again and rapidly searched the body.

A low ejaculation escaped him as he drew forth a folded bit of paper, bearing words in writing, some of which appeared to deeply interest him as his keen eyes glanced swiftly over the lines. For an instant it seemed as though he would resume his search, but then he rose from his knee, slipping the document into his bosom, muttering:

"Let the rest go—if there is anything more! This is enough to justify my shot—bah!" with a short, hard laugh as he tossed his head, half defiantly at the thought. "Even a lady can hardly blame me for reddening my hands in her own behalf!"

Without another glance at the carcass, the stranger turned away and reentered the little glade, where Uncle Zero had fully restored his young mistress. She had never entirely lost her senses. Only a dizzy faintness, a whirling mist before her eyes and over her sorely shaken brain; and a few drops of the brandy, added to a liberal application to her face, brought joy the most extravagant to poor Uncle Zero.

The stranger stopped short with a half laugh as he saw the old servant drop to his knees, with clasped hands uplifted, with gaunt body swaying to and fro as his quavering voice rose in half song, half prayer of thanksgiving.

"Praise de good Lor', an' gib fanks unto de hebberly Fadder! Sing hallelujah to de lam'—oh-ah! Fanks to de good angel what come an' sweep dem debble's imps to 'struction an'—Hush, honey bird! Dar' ain't nuffin' mo' to be skeered ob—glory to de kin' Marster fo' stretchin' out He han' to sabe His chillen—oh-ah! Glory to—"

Berthine caught sight of the stranger, and rose to her feet, one hand gently tapping the half-crazed negro on the head in mute warning.

The rescuing knight, noticing how pale her momentarily flushed face grew the next instant, swiftly stepped forward, uncovering and bowing respectfully as he hurriedly uttered:

"You are ill—still faint from the shock, lady! I beg of you to resist, if only for a few moments. There is no further danger. Those rascally fellows have taken to their heels and—"

Berthine gave a slight shiver, her gaze briefly turning toward the spot where Dick Crump had fallen with a bullet through his skull, where an ugly red hue was still visible on the dead leaves which carpeted the little glade.

The bronzed face flushed a trifle, but there was no trace of annoyance, regret or embarrassment in his tones or manner as he spoke:

"They will not come back of their own accord, and long before they can gather any of their fellows—if, indeed, this shameful outrage was not wholly planned by their own brains—we will be out of their reach. You are still faint—you must rest for your own sake."

There was something in his tones that brought a trace of color back to the blanched cheeks of the maiden. It was not tenderness, from a sentimental standpoint. And yet—a lover could not have shown more interest, could not have been more eager to contribute to her own good than this bronzed stranger.

She was faint; there could be no questioning that fact. The ordeal had been a severe one for a young woman to endure. She had seen death in that savage face, had felt it in that vicious grip on her throat. She had seen the cruel blade quivering above her head, and heard that coarse voice vowing to murder her in case of interference. And feeling herself so helpless in that ruthless grasp, she had suffered the pangs of death during the few seconds which intervened before her rescue.

The stranger involuntarily reached out a hand to steady her as he saw her grow dizzy, but Berthine, with a faint smile, stepped back until she felt the protecting arm of Uncle Zero.

"I am faint—it will soon pass off," she murmured, as the faithful old servant gently lowered her to the ground where the mossy trunk of a tree lent a grateful support to her back.

"You ain't hurt, honey? Dem debble's imps didn't—didn't—"

Uncle Zero choked at the words, but brightened up again as Berthine forced a reassuring smile.

"Not hurt—only shaken and—frightened if I must confess the humiliating truth," with a half hysterical laugh in conclusion.

The face of the stranger was graver than usual as he spoke slowly:

"It was enough to frighten a man with iron nerves, lady. That dastardly ruffian meant to use the knife, beyond a doubt, rather than suffer the loss of his prize otherwise. It would be mistaken policy to pretend he did not. You have been sorely shocked, as well you might be, but there is no craven blood in your veins; you are not afraid to face the truth, nor will you fault me for speaking so plainly."

Possibly it was because he spoke so confidently, though with such gravity, that Berthine felt the color returning to her cheeks and her brain to grow clearer. It was a curious sort of compliment, yet his words struck her in that light. They were true: she did not come of a cowardly strain, and this she would prove by her actions.

"I have you to thank for my life—for his life, too," with a quick glance into the wrinkled face of Uncle Zero, now damp with tears of silent joy as he began to more fully realize the almost miraculous escape of his idolized young mistress.

"Could I do less?" gravely responded the stranger, a faint smile softening his rather stern countenance. "It was fate—or Providence—that led up to it all!"

"I was thinking of you—hoping that you might come in time—because I knew of no other person near, I suppose," murmured Berthine, flushing, her dark eyes drooping before that steady gaze.

Just the ghost of a smile flickered about those lips, but it vanished long before the maiden dared again lift her eyes to his face after her impulsive speech.

"And I—it sounds like a coincidence," with a short laugh, "was thinking of you at the moment I caught a pistol or gun report. I was—why should I not admit as much, in the face of what has followed?"

"There was something—not in your face, but in your figure, in the manner in which you bore yourself in the saddle—that reminded me of a picture at home: the picture of my mother, taken when she was still young and beautiful in her early married days. I was thinking of this resemblance, and wondering if your face—it was hidden by your veil, remember—would bear out the semblance. I was wondering who you were and what your name, when I caught sight of a couple of rough fellows skulking through the timber."

"I hardly gave them a second glance, so busy were my thoughts, but before I had ridden much further, a fear flashed across my brain; I remembered that you were coming along the road and—well, something seemed to warn me of impending evil, and I even drew rein to ride back to make sure that those rascals meant you no harm. Only a fear of annoying you—for, of course, you would not understand the motive that impelled me—held me in doubt for a few moments. Then—I heard a pistol-shot, and felt that my fears had proved only too true."

"I turned back at once, but the distance was greater than I thought, and I lost time in searching for signs by the way. Then—I saw a whip lying in the road, and the marks where somebody had fallen in the dust."

"Dat was me—dum 'em fo' debble's imps!"

mumbled Uncle Zero, gingerly feeling of his injured scalp where the heavy club had fallen.

"I saw enough to satisfy me that you had been abducted," with a bow toward Berthine, whose bright eyes were now fixed upon his darkly handsome face, "and I followed along the trail to do what I could. I lost time, of course, in picking up the trail, and not knowing at what moment I might stumble upon the varlets, but—you know what followed. I had to act promptly and decisively. For your sake I regret what was forced upon me, but, Miss—"

"My name is Berthine—Berthine Tempest," murmured the girl.

The stranger gave a start, his eyes opening widely, his face the picture of intense amazement.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RELATIVE AND A FORTUNE.

"Is it possible?" he ejaculated, a gleam of joy mingling with that look of astonishment as he gazed intently into the face of the maiden. "Did I understand you to say—Berthine Tempest? Not the daughter—not any relation to Noble Tempest, once of Kentucky?"

Startled by this strange action, Berthine had shrunk back as far as the support at her back would permit, but she managed to bow assent to the question, confirming it with:

"My father was named Noble Tempest, and I believe he once lived in Kentucky. But I don't understand—"

"Yet it is very simple, after all," laughed the stranger, his face lit up by a bright smile, his voice full of cordiality as he added: "It means that you are my cousin; that you have found, not only a relative, but a great fortune as well!"

Berthine turned paler, not yet comprehending the truth. She was even frightened and involuntarily drew away her hands as he extended his own, looking to Uncle Zero as if asking his protection.

But the old negro was too busy staring open-mouthed at the dark stranger who so impudently claimed relationship to his young mistress, to note her silent appeal. And as his faithful eyes caught the brief frown that flashed across the darkly handsome face, Uncle Zero forgot the important service this stranger had rendered them both. Right or wrong, he felt that this person would bear a good deal of watching.

"It is difficult to realize, isn't it, cousin mine?" laughed the rescuing knight, smiling more pleasantly than before, his dark eyes bent on the pale, wondering countenance before him. "Yet it is very simple, as I said before. You have heard of an Aunt Drusilla, the only sister to your father?"

Berthine bowed slightly, still perplexed, still bewildered.

"She was my mother, and I am called Boyd Ashby."

A quick light flashed into the eyes of the maiden, as she started to her feet, and Boyd Ashby, misconstruing her intention, again reached out his hands to clasp hers. A look of mortified amazement came into his face as Berthine motioned him back, at the same time taking the arm of Uncle Zero, who frowned most portentously at the audacious stranger who dared to thus disconcert his adored young mistress.

"Aunt Drusilla married a man named Archer, and—"

Boyd Ashby laughed softly, all traces of annoyance vanishing from his face as he hastened to explain:

"You are right; she *did* marry a man named Archer, but he died while she was yet young, and she married again; my father, Temple Ashby. Surely your parents must have heard of this? And yet—it may not have come to their ears, after all. I know that I never heard your name spoken, and only for a rather curious circumstance—which I hope you will permit me to explain, before long—I might never have known I had a relative living."

While Boyd Ashby was speaking Berthine watched his face closely, but she failed to detect aught therein to confirm the first doubts that had assailed her at his claiming relationship. She could see nothing but frank honesty and warm interest in a newly-found relative.

And then—what he had dared in her behalf appealed strongly to her woman's heart. Only for his prompt and decided action, what might not have been her fate?

A shudder shook her figure, and one hand went up to her eyes as though in pain. She moved back a pace, and Uncle Zero, misinterpreting the motion, ruffled up at Boyd Ashby, brave as a gamecock.

"Yo' done mek trouble 'nough, marse! Dar's heap room in dish yer' worl', 'dout yo' crowdin' skeery-nigh to Miss Berfine, an' ef—"

Boyd Ashby stared open-eyed at the old negro, lifting a hand as though to brush him aside, when Berthine recovered from that brief dizziness, half-laughing as she caught Uncle Zero by the arm and said:

"Pardon him, I beg of you, cousin; and you, Uncle Zero, remember that this gentleman is a relative—my cousin by blood."

Without a murmur Uncle Zero fell back, shaking his blood-marked paw dubiously as he watched their hands meet in friendly grasp.

He could not fly in the face of his young mistress; what she said must be law unto him; and yet—until this dark-faced stranger should fairly prove his claim to relationship, he, Uncle Zero, would keep a wary eye upon his movements. And if anything crooked should turn up—well, it would not be his fault if it succeeded!

"Then you have decided to admit my claim, cousin?" laughed Boyd Ashby, his eyes glowing, his face smiling pleasantly as he warmly pressed the gloved hands between his own.

"If I hesitated at first, it was because I am still shaken, still far from being my usual self," murmured Berthine, her dark eyes drooping before his almost ardent gaze, a warm flush coming into her cheeks.

"You have suffered much—would that I could blot the memory of the past two hours from your brain forever!" he uttered, earnestly.

"It was hard—it was very trying," with a little shiver and a nervous glance over her shoulder as though anticipating the return of the ruffians. "I cannot understand why they should have molested me."

Even as she uttered the words, there flashed back a memory of the speech made by the squat ruffian, and her face paled again. Boyd Ashby grew grave, as well, and drew from his bosom the note which he had taken from the corpse of Dick Crump.

"This may explain their purpose, cousin," he said, giving her the piece of paper and silently watching her face as she glanced rapidly over the lines.

These were not many, but their substance can be given still more briefly than by inserting a copy. No names save those of herself and Uncle Zero were mentioned, but the ones to whom the note was sent, doubtless Dick Crump and his fat companion, were directed to watch their opportunity for abducting Berthine Tempest. They were to send word of her captivity to her mother, demanding a heavy ransom for her release. The only signature was the single word, "Captain."

"You have no idea who this scoundrel can be?" asked Boyd Ashby, tapping the signature with a finger-tip as he gazed keenly into the maiden's face.

Berthine shook her head in silence. He took the note from her hand, carefully placing it in a side-pocket, muttering sternly:

"I may find him some day, and if I do—Well," with a smile, and return to his former lightness of demeanor, "sufficient unto the day, you know, cousin! When we do meet, I promise this worthy captain a most interesting interview. Until then—poof!" with an airy puff of breath across his leveled palm.

"That disposes of the captain, and leaves us free to think of more agreeable matters. Uncle Zero!"

"Sarvent, sah!" with a sudden start of confusion; for more than ever the old negro was doubting this dashing relative who had so curiously put in his claim upon Berthine Tempest.

"Your mistress's horse, please. We will get out of the wilderness as soon as may be. For, of course, I am to see you safely to your home, Cousin Berthine?"

"Don't I know it, den?" muttered Uncle Zero, beneath his breath, as he hobbled over to where the horses were hitched. "Needn't tell me! He ain't none ob de real Tempests! Ketch dem sayin' please to ole niggah! Eyes open, Unc' Zero! Watch him, niggah—watch him ba-ad!"

Blissfully unconscious of this rapidly growing enmity, Boyd Ashby assisted his cousin to the saddle, and declining the offer which Uncle Zero felt in duty bound—for Miss Berthine's sake—to make of his horse, he strode briskly away through the timber along the back trail, one hand on the reins of the steed ridden by his fair relative.

When the road was nearly regained, Boyd Ashby turned to one side, where he had left his horse hitched in order to follow the trail more silently, and leaping agilely into the saddle, he rejoined Berthine as she entered the road, heading for home.

Still mumbling, still suspicious, already beginning his close watch on this dashing impostor (for impostor Uncle Zero was ready to take oath this stranger would eventually turn out to be), the faithful negro rode alone in the rear, his ears pricked up to catch every word that fell from Boyd Ashby's lips.

These, after a few unimportant remarks, were interesting enough to rivet the attention of Berthine Tempest, judging from her eager eyes, and occasional interjections of wonderment.

"And to think that, during all these years, you should be living so near at hand—almost within arm's length, indeed, for I have stopped off at Vicksburg more times than I can well remember! To think that you should be so near, yet never discovered—never giving word or sign of your existence!"

"Why should I? And to whom?" half laughed Berthine.

"Are the ties of blood so feeble? Are the last wishes of the dead to go as naught, then?" almost reproachfully ejaculated Ashby, a bright glow in his peculiar-hued eyes as they gazed into her dusky orbs.

"I am not sure that I understand you."

"What! can it be possible that you have never noticed any of the many advertisements calling for information concerning Noble Tempest, or his heirs, in case of his being dead?"

Berthine shook her head in silence.

"I have seen nothing of the sort. We live a very quiet life, you must know. Mother is an invalid; she has not walked a step for many weary years. We have few friends; of those few not one has ever called our attention to such an advertisement."

Boyd Ashby, his eyes glowing, his handsome face lit up by a bright smile, bent over and grasped her gloved hand, pressing it cordially as he cried:

"Since it had to be, I am rejoiced, for now I can be the first to congratulate you, my cousin, on your grand good fortune."

Uncle Zero uttered a little growl as his young mistress seemed to shrink away from this effusive demonstration, but Boyd Ashby paid no attention to either action, adding briskly:

"I congratulate you, Cousin Berthine, on being an heiress! Until to-day I was rather inclined to regard Uncle Theron as a sort of—to put it mildly—crank! Now—he builded better than he knew, and had he been a prophet he couldn't have done a more graceful deed, or pitched upon a more lovely heiress!"

"I do not—what do you mean, Cousin Boyd?" faltered Berthine.

"You surely have heard your parents speak of an uncle, Theron Tempest, cousin?"

"If so, I have forgotten," was the slow response.

"Then you can hear of his death without shedding many tears, particularly as that mournful event took place nearly two years ago," was the half-laughing response. "Uncle Theron was rich—richer than any one man has a right to be, in this world of poverty and wretchedness, I have often caught myself thinking; but never to so think again! I only wish his fortune had been twice as enormous, for your sake, Cousin Berthine!"

That cousin cast a keen, searching glance into his darkly handsome face at this speech. Did she, too, begin to suspect his perfect sincerity? Did she detect a ring of base metal in his words, in his tones?

For an instant she almost thought so, but not after that gaze. She could not doubt his earnestness, his perfect sincerity, after looking into his curiously-hard eyes.

"It is so strange—so unexpected—that I cannot realize all your words would appear to convey. I am glad that we are so near home; this is our gate; for I need time to think, to reflect."

"Will it take long? Will to-morrow be too early for listening to the story I have to tell?" he murmured, as Berthine drew rein to permit Uncle Zero passing to open the gate which led to the distant white house. "May I call then on my return from Mr. Morgan's?"

"Return!" with an echo of genuine surprise in her voice. "Surely you will go with me, to the house? Surely you will make this your home? You must—mother would never forgive me were I to let you pass!"

Was it a gleam of triumph that shot across his greenish eyes?

CHAPTER VIII.

YELLOWHAMMER JONES IN A WHITE HEAT.

WITH an almost savage sweep of the steering-oar, Top-Sawyer Sam whirled the bow of the yawl quarter way around, heading for a few rods below the spot where the marooned gambler had been sucked beneath the muddy surface.

"Pull—for your lives, pull!" he grated, seconding the words by plying his own oar after the fashion of a paddle.

The men flung every ounce of strength into the effort, knowing from the white, strained countenance of their coxswain how critical was the moment. Top-Sawyer Sam glared past their bent heads as he sought to catch a glimpse of the endangered man, for surely he would rise to the surface, if only to sink again!

There was a fleeting glimpse of a bit of green—perhaps a part of the willows to which the drowning wretch was still clinging—but nothing more, though Top-Sawyer Sam could almost have taken oath that the yawl had reached and passed the point where—

With a cry he dropped his oar and rose to his feet, having just caught a glimpse of a human face as the yawl swept past. Only a glimpse; then the muddy waters rolled over the spot again, to be split a second later by the figure of the River Rex as he sprung over the stern of the yawl!

The boat turned half-around and tipped sharply under that impulse, and the deck-bands seemed all taken aback, so wholly unexpected was this action on the part of their self-elected leader; but they acted promptly enough when, a second or two later, Top-Sawyer Sam came to

the surface, bringing with him the fellow-being for whose life they were working so earnestly.

"Lively, lads!" spluttered the River Rex, with difficulty dodging the frantic grasp of those terror-nerved arms. "We'll be—Siamese twins if—this gentleman fastens on—"

It was a brief but desperate struggle, in an element where the most powerful man is terribly handicapped, especially when fully clothed as was the case with Top-Sawyer Sam. The drowning wretch had only sense enough left to seek support, and struggled madly to clasp the man who had come to his aid around the body, the neck—anywhere, just so he might feel something more substantial than water in his stiffening fingers.

Top-Sawyer Sam had all he could do to foil him, and rapidly as the men in the boat worked, they were none too speedy for him. Despite his utmost efforts, the marooned gambler had fastened upon him with arms and legs, clinging tighter than a leech, with a blind desperation that would in a very few minutes more have sunk them helplessly beneath the hungry waters.

"Don't bother to pick and choose," cried the River Rex as strong hands closed upon them. "Haul one in, and the other 'll be mighty apt to keep company!"

There was truth in this damp jest, for the rescued man clung to his rescuer with a grip that could scarcely be broken, even by force, after they were dragged over the side of the yawl.

Top-Sawyer Sam smiled faintly as a ringing cheer came to their ears from the steamer, telling that the rescue was realized. After all, it was something to feel a little proud of!

"Whirl her back, my lads!" he exclaimed, with an approving nod, as the oarsmen dropped into their seats again. "Pity to delay the old scow, when there's a chance of breaking the record for—Well, that does settle it!"

While unclasping the long fingers that were still gripping his shoulder, Top-Sawyer Sam pushed back the dank hair which fell over the face of the rescued man, for the first time obtaining a fair glimpse of his features. A start of surprise, then an explosive breath that came near being a snort of utter disgust.

"I thank you—I thank you!" faintly muttered the rescued fellow, showing the first positive signs of life since being dragged into the yawl.

Sam turned away his face, upon which was written a curious mixture of annoyance and dislike. For the moment he fairly regretted having gone to so much trouble to save this life!

The strong arms rapidly sent the yawl over the river to where the steamboat was still floating down-stream, stern on, and it was no very difficult matter to lay the boat along the bows, where plenty of eager hands were waiting to aid both rescued and rescuer.

Top-Sawyer Sam impatiently brushed aside the assistance proffered him, springing lightly to the deck as he uttered:

"Don't worry more than you can help, gentlemen, and take a good, square squint at the sweet face of yonder damp angel before you anoint him with your tears and sighs of thanksgiving."

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated Elegant West, who was among the foremost to lend assistance, but who abruptly relaxed his grasp on the nearly-drowned wretch, and started back with a dark frown of angry disgust. "Yellowhammer Jones, or I'm a full-fledged angel!"

Captain Waters also seemed anything but delighted with this revelation, but he was less particular, or else his mantle of charity was broader than that of his subordinate, for he growled forth:

"Well, we can't shove him back into the drink again, can we? He's built like a white man, even if he is Yellowhammer Jones!"

Top-Sawyer Sam smiled as he glanced back over his shoulder long enough to note these actions and catch the words recorded; then he ran briskly up the broad flight leading to the cabin-deck, hastening at once to his state-room in quest of a dry change.

As he passed through Social Hall, he saw Green Clay and Luke Shortlip sitting together at the card-table, apparently engaged in consultation, but they said nothing to him, and he passed them by with barely a glance. Time enough to settle that little affair after he was rid of these uncomfortably damp garments.

The change was quickly effected, but Top-Sawyer Sam was in no particular haste to leave his state-room. There was a dark frown on his strong features as he sat on the edge of the lower berth, gnawing at his finger-ends, his eyes glowing steadily, but noting naught of the objects on which they rested.

"I won't say I'm sorry I saved the rascal, but—"

Yet it would be still nearer a lie to say that he rejoiced.

And yet—as he forced himself to ask—why should this be?

"He is a gambler, but so am I! Men hint at a black record marked up against his name, but am I wholly without sin? Can I put a finger on

any particular crime of which he has been guilty, unless it be a stray trick of the trade; a bit of cunning fleecing, of plucking golden feathers from land boobies; or a row or two, where he had to burn powder or flash steel to pull his way through to dry land? But, curse the rascal! I don't like him! I wish anybody else had ruined a suit of clothes pulling him in out of the wet!"

Meanwhile Yellowhammer Jones found no lack of friendly hands and sympathizing voices to make him welcome to the steamer, and while the man to whom he undoubtedly owed his life was sulkily brooding over the adventure in his state-room, he was neutralizing the effects of his outward dampness by drenching his interior with hot and fragrant drinks before the elegant bar.

Despite the unfavorable circumstances under which he was forced to appear, this Yellowhammer Jones was far from being a repulsive-looking object. Despite the lines which mental torture had drawn upon his face, it was a handsome one, after a certain reckless, dashing style, matching well his tall, athletic figure.

His hair was worn long, and in spite of the muddy river water it showed a glimmer of gold as the sunlight fell across it. A heavy, drooping pair of mustaches—in themselves a curiosity, those times—shaded his mouth and concealed the thin, cruel lips which were the only disagreeable part of his face.

His garb was peculiar, and may have helped to fasten upon him the title of "Yellowhammer." It was of fine material, and well made, but of a peculiar yellowish tint, now darkened almost to brown by dampness.

There were not lacking those who seemed eager to learn how he chanced to find himself in such a perilous situation, and either this or the strong liquor which he swallowed so eagerly, rapidly drove all weakness from the nearly drowned man. His cold blue eyes began to glow and glitter, his heavy brows to come nearer together with deep lines separating them, his voice to ring out with cruel distinctness.

"How came I there, you ask, gentlemen?" he cried, each word adding another note of fierceness as it passed his lips. "I was marooned—landed on that bit of cursed sand by a man whose heart I'll take the measure of before I'm a month older—devil grill him by inches!"

"Of course you'd done nothing to deserve such treatment?" languidly observed Elegant West, hiding a yawn with one be-ringed hand. "Men who are put ashore never do, I take notice. Curious—very!"

Yellowhammer Jones flashed a swift glance into that cool, firm face, but made no immediate response. Languid though Elegant West appeared, there was something of the tiger under that calm surface, and even Yellowhammer Jones did not care to fairly arouse him, just then.

"What I did, I would do again," he said, turning to the group at the bar. "What I did, you would do, gentlemen. Simply fought for my rights when a brace of foul curs tried to rob me of my good money, and failing in that, flashed cold steel before my eyes. I got even with them," and a harsh laugh parted his thin lips, his eyes glowing vividly, his thin, muscular fingers closing with a significant grip as his hand tapped the polished bar. "I got even with them, and, as the devil hears my oath this moment, I'll get even with old Egerton before the dog-days come!"

"Jack Egerton, master of the Bald Eagle, you mean?" drawled West.

Yellowhammer Jones frowned assent, and the clerk slowly added:

"You're a speculator, I believe? You make and lose money by betting on anything from a grain of sand to a mountain? Well, I'm not much of a sport myself, but I'm open to cover your pile that old Jack Egerton will wipe the earth with your long carcass whenever you tackle him for that get-even—unless you jump him from cover, behind his back."

There was a ludicrous haste in the manner by which the passengers left a clear space between and around Yellowhammer Jones and Elegant West, just as though one and all expected cold lead to commence flying in dead earnest; but this was not to be.

The clerk never moved from the railing against which he was leaning, languidly paring his nails. Yellowhammer Jones smiled faintly.

"You can repeat your offer, without much fear of being convicted of bluffing, Mr. West," he said, with a meaning glance over his own person. "What those thieves left me, the river claimed. Still, you and I may run up against each other at a more favorable time, when—"

"I'll write down my words, and have them ready to hand you at that happy moment if you prefer, Mr. Jones. Or," with a languid smile at the thought, "possibly I can find others just as expressive, by racking my poor brain. Take your choice, and I'll be suited."

All this took place while Top-Sawyer Sam was gnawing his nails in the solitude of his cabin, and the end had come before he rose from his berth and opening the door, stepped forth into the long cabin.

His face was calm and showed no signs of the

mental struggle which had occupied those minutes, and no one ignorant of the facts would have dreamed that only a short time before he had been in the river, struggling for dear life with a drowning wretch.

Top-Sawyer Sam strode along toward the office, passing through the card-room, where the two gamblers were still sitting in frowning silence, but, just as he passed the second door, a cringing form crept up to him, and Farrington Mobbs timidly touched his arm.

"Well?" frowned the River Sport, with a gesture of impatient disgust. "What's biting you, Foxy Mobbs?"

"Save me—that dreadful man!" the lawyer's clerk, with a shivering glance toward Yellowhammer, gasped. "He'll murder me!"

CHAPTER X.

FARRINGTON MOBBS ELECTS A GUARDIAN.

At these words of the lawyer's clerk, Yellowhammer Jones turned in that direction, a peculiar expression flashing into his haggard face. For an instant he seemed to hesitate, during which brief interval Top-Sawyer Sam felt the skinny fingers of Farrington Mobbs spasmodically closing upon his arm. Then he strode forward, and with a whine the old man turned and fairly tore open the door, fleeing as though from instant destruction!

Sam stared after him for a moment, then turned a keen glance upon the face of the man whom he had saved from a watery grave. A ray of light flashed upon him as he noted the startled, almost savage glare with which Jones was following that hastily-retreating shape. After all, there might be more than hysterics in the manner of the lawyer's clerk!

"One of us two seems to be a nightmare to that old fellow; do you or am I to claim that dubious credit?" coolly demanded the River King, one white hand lightly tapping the arm of the marooned gambler.

Yellowhammer turned toward him with a perceptible start, but he gave this an adroit twist, if indeed he was acting. A flush came into his haggard face, for the time rendering it handsome enough, and there was a sincere quaver in his voice as he uttered:

"They tell me you saved my life, Mr. Cary! It may not be worth much to the world, but it is very precious to me, and I thank you for your noble, brave deed—I thank you a thousandfold more earnestly in my heart, for one's lips can say so little when—"

"Then it's hardly worth trying for, is it?" interposed Top-Sawyer Sam, gazing steadily into his face, but making no move toward accepting the hand which the gambler so eagerly extended.

"You saved my life!" muttered Jones, his eyes drooping, his face losing its color, evidently keenly feeling this unhidden aversion.

"I helped to pull you out of the drink, I admit," in painfully distinct tones, as the interested passengers came a little nearer. "I hope I would have done the same thing even if I had recognized your face or figure; I hope so," he repeated, with almost cruel distinctness.

Jones flashed a burning glance into that impassive, handsome face, his voice husky and indistinct:

"If you had recognized me, you would not have tried to save my life? Is that what you mean to convey, Mr. Cary?"

Top-Sawyer Sam flung out one white hand after a fashion that would not have disgraced Elegant West himself, as he drawled:

"It's a mighty poor player who persists in crowding the limit when he is dead sure he's fated to lose every turn, Mr. Jones. Still, if it will make you feel any more comfortable, I'll say this much: I hope I'm too much of a man to stand by and see even a cur drown when by putting out a hand I might save his life; but—the flesh is weak, is mighty weak, at times!"

It was a cruel speech, under the circumstances, and even Top-Sawyer Sam realized as much when he saw how white grew the face of Yellowhammer Jones at the low laugh which came from the office. But the gambler bore it well, and fairly put the River Sport to shame by his manner.

"You bear down hard on a poor devil out of luck, Mr. Cary, but it's not for me to complain. I owe you a life. Until I have wiped out that debt, I can only bow to your will."

He did bow, falling back through the crowd that gave way for his passage, but Top-Sawyer Sam quickly followed him up, saying more like his usual self:

"I was wrong, Jones, and I beg pardon just as publicly as I insulted you. See—now's your chance to get even with me!"

And he frankly extended his white hand toward the wet gambler.

Instead of rejecting the advance, Yellowhammer grasped the member and pressed it warmly, his tones husky and uncertain as he said:

"Not even yet—I value my life a notch higher still!"

"Drop it, then, and we'll both forget that I

turned churl," laughed the River Sport, turning toward the bar with a nod which the spruce, white-aproned waiter readily interpreted.

Top-Sawyer Sam was not one to stop half-way, and as soon as he could do so without giving the gambler fresh cause for offense he bade Elegant West, in a whisper, mark Yellowhammer Jones's passage paid as far as he chose to travel with them, charging the amount to his account.

"As you say, Cary," with a shrug. "Of course we can't well pitch the rascal overboard just now, but here's devoutly hoping he may find a speedy place for landing."

"He's bad medicine, no doubt, but it's barely possible that there's worse fellows haunting the river; which reminds me—I haven't settled that little dispute between those carrion crows, as yet."

Elegant West smiled as his dark eyes turned toward the big safe in which rested the disputed money.

"No great rush, Sam, is there? Let them wait; it'll be good for their digestion."

But Sam had his own reasons for taking his departure without much more delay, though it was not the money that turned his thoughts toward Farrington Mobbs. He recalled the cringing, trembling wretch, and remembered the strange look with which Yellowhammer Jones had watched the hasty flight of the lawyer's clerk.

"What does it all mean? Mobbs was in dead earnest when he spoke, and there was anything but love in Yellowhammer's eyes as they followed the skinny rascal! There's something crooked in the wind, and I'm just in the humor for turning it up to the light!"

With these thoughts stirring his mind, Top-Sawyer watched his chance and slipped out of the office to the guards when he could do so without attracting attention, then passing rapidly around the side of the cabins, slackening his pace as he felt that he must be near the one in which he had seen Farrington Mobbs take refuge.

A more deliberate calculation led him to pause at one of the shuttered doors which marked each state-room, and after peering through the stationary slats as well as he was able, but without making any discovery, Sam gently rapped with his knuckles, softly uttering:

"Beg pardon, but I reckon you're in there, Farrington Mobbs?"

A half-stifled ejaculation was the only response, but that brought a grim smile to the river sport's lips, for he recognized the voice of the man whom he was seeking, and he rattled the screen impatiently.

"Open up, Mobbs. How in time am I to protect you, unless you tell me just who and what you are frightened of?"

"It's you! You are there, Mr. Cary?" quavered the lawyer's clerk.

"I'm here, but I'll be heading for some other seaport in another second, unless you open up, you scary critter!"

The shutters were at once opened, and Sam stepped into the narrow state-room, where Mobbs stood trembling, looking ghastly in the dim light that sifted through the open transom over the inner door.

Top-Sawyer Sam closed and hooked the shutter behind him, then sat down on the edge of the berth, keenly scanning the yellow, lined face of the lawyer's clerk for a brief space before speaking.

"You have got it, bad," he nodded, as the look of doubt fled from his eyes. "Then you didn't barely imagine it at all? There was just a spice of truth in your fright out yonder?"

"You saw—he meant to clutch and choke the life out o' me then and there," panted Mobbs, with a terrified glance over his shoulder as though expecting his enemy to suddenly pounce upon him.

"And you begged me to save you. Well," with cold deliberation, as one speaks who wishes each and every word to make its full impression, "if I am to do that, I must know just what excuse you have for asking such assistance. I must be fully assured that I'm not helping cheat justice or the hangman. I must know why you suspect Yellowhammer Jones of seeking your precious life. You follow me, Mobbs?"

"Isn't it enough—"

"I'll let you know when you reach that point," with a frown. "If you want me to, play guardian to your tender youth, unbosom yourself in a hurry. Or—I'm no ways anxious for the job. It can't well be a creditable one, since you are mixed up in the affair. On the whole, I reckon I'll make money and credit by standing out of the game."

Sam could hardly have chosen better terms for rushing the frightened fellow to free confession. Mobbs was terribly frightened. He really felt that his life was in great peril, and as Top-Sawyer Sam had once that day interfered to save him from being robbed, if not actually murdered, he felt that he alone could protect him from this fresh peril.

"I will—I will tell you everything," panted the poor wretch. "Only promise that you will stand between me and that terrible desperado—"

only promise that you will not permit him to murder me!"

"Meaning Yellowhammer Jones, of course?" asked Top-Sawyer Sam.

Mobbs nodded vigorously, a look of intense hatred mingling with his terror.

"He tried to kill me in St. Louis, but I managed to escape him. He has followed me down the river, expressly to put me out of the way before I can divulge the important news—"

"And that news, Mobbs?" curtly interjected Top Sawyer Sam.

"Is of a vast fortune—an immense fortune!" dwelling on the term as only a miserly soul could. "A mighty fortune which he and his allies will forever lose, unless they can still my tongue in time!"

"Draw it mild, Mobbs!" warningly muttered Top-Sawyer Sam.

"It is no more than the truth I am telling you," more composedly added the lawyer's clerk. "There is a great fortune held in trust by a lawyer—by the lawyer in whose office I used to find employ—"

"And use for your ears as well, no doubt!" with a laugh.

"By accident—purely through accident, I assure you, sir—I learned the truth, and when I was kicked out—actually kicked out of the office, if you can realize that scandalous fact, sir—"

"I think I can, without seriously straining my powers of imagination," smiled Sam. "It is not difficult to connect scandalous conduct with certain persons. But go on, if you please."

"I was imprudent—far from wise or guarded in my indignation, but who can wonder at that?" still swelling with indignation as he reflected on his shameful ejection from the office. "I let escape the fact that I had discovered their precious secret; I even went so far as to swear that I'd risk my life and reputation to restore this great fortune to the rightful heir!"

"Very noble in you, Mobbsy," nodded Top-Sawyer. "Of course you expected to gain nothing in the way of reward save the consciousness of having performed a just and generous action?"

This was an unlucky speech, as the River King at once realized from the change which came over the withered face of the lawyer's clerk, and he hastened to cover it over as best he might.

"Yellowhammer Jones is playing for this fortune, then? Is he the leader in the game, or only a partner? Speak out, man!" with sudden impatience. "If I am to help you, I've got to know just who is in the game. If not, you can hoe your own row, and I'll simply look on!"

"He is only a partner," was the hasty response, as Mobbs tremblingly caught at his sleeve, as though to restrain his flight by force. "The real principal is named Boyd Ashby, who—"

He stopped short as Sam gave a sudden start, and a suspicious light flashed into his eyes, only to fade away as Cary said:

"I know that fellow, almost as well as I know Yellowhammer! And if you've got to buck against those two—well, you've got right smart need of a guardian, sure enough!"

"I may count on—you will see me safely through to Vicksburg?"

"I'll do my level best, if you see fit to trust me clean through," was the grave response. "Of course you'll have to show up when I dispose of that disputed money; but, after that—well, if I were you, I'd stick mighty close to my state-room until reaching Vicksburg! You can play sick, if you like. Say your tender constitution has been woefully upset by that ugly stroke Green Clay gave you, for lack of a better excuse!" with a laugh.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORY OF A WILL.

BOYD ASHBY yielded gracefully to his cousin, riding with her through the gate which Uncle Zero swung open.

"If you think your mother would wish it, Cousin Berthine," he smiled, half doubtingly, as they rode along the shaded road which led up to the front of the white, pleasant building known far and near as the Randolph Place, after its original proprietor. "But if she is an invalid, would it not be both kinder and wiser for me to give you ample time to break the news to her?"

"Mother is an invalid, but she is really stronger than one might think who only knew of her as unable to leave her chair or couch," was the grave response. "She will be pleased to welcome you. She would be shocked to hear that I had permitted you to pass by as a stranger instead of making you welcome as a relative—and one who had so recently preserved me from such peril."

"Never mention it, my dear," with a low, mellow laugh as their eyes met. "It cost me nothing, and I have already been richly rewarded."

Berthine flushed warmly, for there was no mistaking the meaning underlying this speech. Her dark eyes drooped, and she hastened to add:

"All the preparation necessary will take but a few minutes in which to tell mother of your coming. You will hardly have time to grow impatient before my return."

By this time they were near the mansion, and though several black servants came forward to receive their young mistress and "company," Boyd Ashby assisted her to alight, greatly to the disgust of Uncle Zero, whose especial privilege that service was on such occasions.

"G'way, you fool niggahs!" he growled, as he looked after the horses, gingerly touching the reins of the animal which this strangely-discovered relative had ridden. "Fink Unc' Zero too ole fo' do him duty? Fink Unc' Zero des fit fo' chaw bread fo' sick monkeys? G'way dah—*you!*" and his angry gaze was turned toward the broad-shouldered figure just entering the house rather than upon the half-frightened, half-giggling darkies who dodged and ducked from his threatening whip. "Git fooled, mebbe! Git fooled, ba-ad!"

Boyd Ashby was not left long alone with his thoughts, for Berthine quickly returned and bade him accompany her to Mrs. Tempest.

"I have told her nothing of what happened back in the woods," hurriedly murmured the maiden, with a half-doubting glance into his darkly handsome face. "She is so easily upset that I dared not speak of that just now, for fear of keeping you too long in waiting."

"She need never be any the wiser, if you think best," gravely responded Ashby. "Why agitate her, when it is all past?"

"I must tell her, but not just now. She has had another of her bad spells this afternoon, and is weak and poorly prepared for such a disagreeable shock as that knowledge would give her."

Boyd Ashby looked as though he was about to propose postponing his own introduction, but Berthine anticipated him with a bright smile:

"Your unexpected coming will prove better than a tonic for poor mother, I am sure. I left her all aquiver with wonder and anticipation which we must not delay. Will you please come with me?"

Five minutes later Boyd Ashby had passed through the ordeal with credit to himself and pleasure to the invalid mother, if one may judge from her sparkling eyes and softly flushed cheeks as she lay gazing into his dark, handsome countenance.

A very agreeable picture the lady formed, too, reclining in her easy-chair that was almost a couch, in the pleasantly-shaded room. Her face was thin, her figure fragile, as well might be the case, but otherwise she would hardly have been mistaken for an incurable invalid.

"It is so strange—so incredible!" she murmured, in pleased excitement. "We have lived so long alone in the world that I can hardly bring myself to believe that aught of our blood flows in other veins."

"What seems stranger still to me, is that you should never have suspected how persistently you have been searched for; that you should never have been seen, or had your attention called to the advertisements which Uncle Theron's lawyer caused to be inserted in all the prominent newspapers," gravely uttered Boyd Ashby.

Mrs. Tempest laughed nervously, the color deepening a little in her cheeks as she cast a swift glance toward Berthine before saying:

"I am not so sure that I would have responded, even had my attention been arrested by those notices. It is hard to explain, but—"

"As one of the family I know something about it," gravely interposed Ashby, as the lady hesitated, seemingly at a loss for words to express her real meaning. "I know that Theron Tempest quarreled bitterly—and causelessly, as I have been led to believe—with all of his family. I know that he swore never to recognize one of them, and conducted himself like a veritable Turk—begging pardon of his ashes for this plain speaking!" with a slight laugh.

"We tried to forget him, as he wished," gravely. "We never mentioned his name during the lifetime of my husband. And since, I really had forgotten that such a personage ever lived. Yet, you say?"

"His last sickness must have worked a great alteration in the old gentleman," soberly uttered Boyd Ashby, taking on a business-like air as he hitched his chair a little nearer that occupied by the invalid. "His will proved that, plainer than spoken words."

A brighter light leaped into the great, lustrous eyes of the invalid at this, and she even leaned a trifle nearer this newly-discovered nephew who had brought such an agreeable variation into her dull, monotonous life.

"His will? Surely he did not relent? He did not express his sorrow for driving his kindred away, with such awful curses and taunts?"

"I will explain; but first," with a quick glance into the face of the maiden, "it is no more than right that you, Cousin Berthine, should know more of your dead-and-gone relatives."

Mrs. Tempest made a half-impatient gesture,

but Boyd Ashby pretended not to see or to rightly interpret its meaning if he saw. He spoke rapidly, but with sufficient clearness for her quick comprehension.

"Theron Tempest was the eldest of three children who reached their majority. The next in age was my mother, Drusilla. The youngest, by a number of years, was your father, Noble Tempest."

"It will do no harm to say that the Tempests, as men and women, have always been rather peculiar in some respects, mentally speaking; that the family name is quite significant when connected with the family temper; and that Uncle Theron was cursed with the worst temper of all his race. I say this to you," with a soft laugh and graceful gesture with his hands, "but I would be more guarded were any foreign ears present, or if I could not see for myself that the Tempest temper has died out in the latest generation."

Berthine seemed a little uneasy at this labored compliment, and her mother almost frowned, her impatience getting the better of her politeness sufficiently far to urge her into ejaculating:

"A fig for the Tempest temper! Let the dead rest in their graves, and their foibles with them! Uncle Theron left a will; in what way does this concern my child or myself?"

Boyd Ashby did not reply immediately, and for a brief interval he gave the impression of one who was weighing his words well before giving them utterance. But when he did speak, it was quite to the point.

"In this way, my dear aunt; you—or rather Cousin Berthine—by that will are left sole heiress to a fortune that must reach if not overpass the point that constitutes a millionaire!"

Mrs. Tempest almost started from her couch, and even Berthine uttered a little ejaculation of wondering amazement as these words came to their ears. Much as they had been led to expect by what had already passed, this far exceeded their wildest anticipations.

For, in those days, millionaires were far from being so common as now, and a much more modest sum was considered a fortune.

Boyd Ashby seemed to enjoy their amazement, his peculiar-hued eyes glowing and sparkling vividly as they glanced from face to face, that of the mother being brightly flushed, that of Berthine turning pale.

"There is a condition attached to the will; Uncle Theron would not have been Uncle Theron else," he added, with a soft laugh as their wondering exclamations died away in a perfectly natural eagerness to learn more concerning this wholly unexpected windfall.

A look of dismay swept into the face of the invalid at this speech, but the young man quickly brushed it aside by saying:

"Not a very serious condition, now that you are found, dear aunt, though, up to the other day the case might have proved different. But let me tell you, as near as I can recall them, the terms of this will."

"Theron Tempest passed the latest years of his life in St. Louis, where he was largely interested in the fur trade, among other paying speculations. He spent little, living and dying almost like a miser, but that only added to his great store. And when he took to his bed, it seems that he forgot or regretted the harshness which, years before, had driven from him his brother and sister—his sole kindred, so far as he could feel assured."

"When it was too late to make other amends, he made his will, but softened though he must have been, he proved himself otherwise unchanged; eccentric to the very last."

"He left his entire fortune to his brother, Noble Tempest, or, if he was dead, to his children, if any existed. Failing them, his wealth was to go to his sister Drusilla, my mother, or to her children in case of her death."

Mrs. Tempest uttered a low ejaculation, a startled look coming into her eyes as they rested upon that dark, handsome countenance.

"And if—only for us, only for Berthine—"

"I would be the heir, since I am an only child," softly laughed Boyd Ashby, more as though he was just coming into a great fortune than on the point of resigning his last chance of wealth in favor of another.

Both mother and daughter looked ill at ease, but Ashby seemed to fairly enjoy the situation, judging from his looks and manner of speech.

"I beg of you do not feel miserable on my account," with a clear, mellow laugh. "I am very comfortably fixed in life, thanks to my father, and though I admit having looked forward to this fortune, believing from your complete silence that I was the rightful heir, I can resign those hopes without a single pang. To prove it: by mere chance a neighbor of yours, Theobald Morgan, mentioned a family called Tempest as living near his plantation. On this faint clew alone I hastened here to learn if it was possible you were the advertised-for relatives. If I was more covetous than honest, would I have taken so much trouble?"

Mrs. Tempest lay back on her pillows, with closed eyes, pale and clearly overcome by so much unusual emotion. Berthine sprang to her assistance, hurriedly murmuring:

"It is nothing serious—it is no more than I feared, this news is so strange, so wholly unexpected. You can do nothing—"

"I am not suffering—only a little dizzy," murmured Mrs. Tempest.

"Then, if I can be of no service, I will step outside for a little," hurriedly responded Ashby, like one unused to scenes of illness such as this. "I will be near at hand if you need me, and—"

"Do not go far. Do not think of riding on your way until we have talked further," said Mrs. Tempest, with greater energy.

Ashby bowed assent, and left the room, drawing a long breath as he stepped into the clear, warm evening air.

Considerable time had been consumed by the talk, and already the shades of evening were settling over the place. There were a considerable number of negro servants moving about the premises, and like one who wishes solitude, who wishes to have plenty of room for thinking, Boyd Ashby passed out of the home grounds proper, into a pleasant grove of trees and shrubbery where the house was hidden from view.

Without noting his course, he wandered on, his head bowed in deep thought, his brows wrinkled darkly, his greenish eyes glowing—to suddenly give a start as he caught sight of a human figure skulking in the shadows, seemingly trying to steal upon him unawares. Then—

"Halt! hands up and empty, or I'll blow you through!" he cried in stern tones, covering the shadowy figure with a pistol-muzzle.

CHAPTER XII.

YELLOWHAMMER PICKS HIS TOOLS.

AFTER a little further talk with Farrington Mobbs, Top-Sawyer Sam left the state-room by the same means which had given him admittance, leaving the skinny old man in a little more cheerful mood. He regained the office and spoke a few words to Elegant West concerning the money over which the card players had quarreled, then made his way to the inner door of Mobbs's state-room, rapping sharply with his knuckles.

Promptly enough the answer came, and with a pitiful assumption of confidence, Farrington Mobbs followed the River Rex back to Social Hall, where the two blacklegs were still sullenly awaiting the result of this unlooked-for complication.

Elegant West placed the disputed stakes on the table, and Top-Sawyer Sam coldly spoke:

"Are you all willing that I should decide this dispute?"

"I am, for one," promptly responded Mobbs.

Green Clay smiled grimly, showing his teeth as he said:

"It's a sort of ground-hog case with us, isn't it, Mr. Cary?"

"You have the privilege of declining my offer as arbitrator."

"There is nothing to call for arbitration," growled Luke Shortlip, surlily, despite the warning glance which his partner gave him. "That living skeleton stole his hand. You saw the cards drop from his clothes when Clay gave him a shake-up. Are we to let our good money be stolen from us after that manner, and not give a healthy kick?"

Top-Sawyer Sam showed his white teeth in an icy smile, and his tones were hard and cutting as he retorted:

"Of course you were innocent of any trickery. Of course you were not playing partners against one man, thinking to fleece an innocent. Of course you are too honorable to even think of stealing cards or putting up a hand. But let that pass."

"I know you, from stem to stern. I know that you never played a straight game of cards, even in sport, from the day you first took to the river as blacklegs. I know that you hold yourself ready to win by open theft what you fail to gather in by covert stealing. I know that there is not an honest drop of blood in the veins of either of you."

"It is your turn now, Mr. Cary," said Green Clay, with a sickly smile on his gaunt features. "Curs may come later."

"If that is meant for a threat, I laugh at it. If it is a hint at demanding satisfaction, as a gentleman might ask reparation for injured feelings, I simply say that my only weapon in meeting such curs as you know yourselves to be is a dog-whip."

"But, to business. It would serve you right were I to turn this money all over to Mobbs, though I make no doubt he did steal his hand; how else could he hope to get the better of such thieves? But, low and mean as he is, I will not insult his feeble manhood by giving him your filthy lucre. Each one take back an equal share; each one take the sum he staked, and drop the matter from this moment. But, look you, my carrion crows!" and there was a hard, almost vicious emphasis in his words as he concluded:

"I don't order you off the boat, for I am not her commander, but I do give you this warning, and each word is as good as sworn to: If you touch card or stake a single dollar while aboard, I'll pitch you into the drink, neck and

crop, even though I thereby poison every fish that swims the Mississippi River!

"Mobbs, step up and pick out your money. For once in your life try to be honest, for if you give cause for belief that you are trying to palm an extra dollar, I'll make your heels break your neck!"

Trembling, cringing, mumbling, Farrington Mobbs obeyed, sullenly watched by the two gamblers. Neither of them uttered a word, or made a move, until the lawyer's clerk secured his own and shuffled away. Nor even then until Top-Sawyer Sam uttered:

"Divide the rest between yourselves, and count it just so much in pocket. And please remember to keep well to leeward when you are obliged to come in my vicinity; you smell of carrion!"

"You want to keep an eye to windward, old fellow, after this," said Elegant West, as he was accompanied back to the office by Top-Sawyer Sam. "If ever there was death in human eyes, I saw it in theirs when you rubbed them down so unmercifully!"

The River Rex laughed softly, carelessly, as though he was borrowing scant trouble on that score.

But Elegant West was right enough in his warning. Though neither of the two blacklegs dared openly resent his words, they were none the less resolved to "get even" with this arrogant gambler.

"I'll let a streak of daylight through his black heart before the moon wanes, if it brings me to the rope!" angrily snarled Luke Shortlip, a little later, as he and Green Clay moodily paced the hurricane-deck in company, whither they had gone to escape the curious looks and undisguised sneers of their fellow-passengers.

"I'd do it in a holy second, only— Well," with a significant shrug of the shoulders as he added, after a brief pause: "The man that puts Top-Sawyer Sam to sleep needs carry a score of lives to back him!"

"He's only a man, after all!" frowningly. "I've run up against others full as tough to handle, and come out top of the heap!"

"I don't mean exactly that," with a faint smile on his gaunt face. "Top-Sawyer Sam is really what they call him: King of the River. He has more stout friends than any other man I know, any one of whom would be as ready as willing to avenge his death. Kill him, and every boat on the river would be barred to us."

"If every path save the one leading to Tophet was barred, I'd kill the insolent knave!" scowled Shortlip, still more viciously.

Green Clay forced a low laugh, then uttered: "It was tough—mighty tough, and I feel it stinging like fire where he rubbed his insults into the hide; but, though you may hardly believe it, I hate that Mobbs by far the bitterest! I could slit his wind with a thrill of heavenly delight!"

"And I don't wonder at it, old fellow!" came a guarded tone, as a tall figure suddenly appeared above the deck, at one of the ladders on the side. "Go gently, mates!" with a low laugh as the blacklegs started and clapped hands to their ever ready weapons.

"It's you, Yellowhammer!" ejaculated Green Clay, with a breath of intense relief as he recognized the speaker.

"Looking for just such good chums as I've proved you both, more than once," was the prompt response, as the marooner cast a swift look about the deck, like one who is not anxious to court observation. "I want to have a talk with you about this same Mobbs," lowering his tone to a whisper as he pronounced the name; "but not out here in the open. I've got a state-room to myself. Walk along the guards and I'll be on the watch. Come in, and maybe you can get square with the rascal, besides making expenses as well. Will you do it?"

"We'll come down and talk it over," cautiously responded Green Clay, too cautious to compromise himself at such an early stage of the game, eager though he undoubtedly was to "get even" with Farrington Mobbs, to whom he attributed all his ills.

Yellowhammer Jones descended the ladder and entered his state-room, which was almost directly opposite the steps, and a few minutes later the two blacklegs came from above, entering the room in obedience to the gambler's signal.

"There's no danger of our being overheard," muttered Yellowhammer Jones with a grim smile as he noted their cautious tiptoeing. "There's no one in either state-room; I made sure of that before you came."

"What sort of game are you playing now?" growled Shortlip.

"What matter, so long as it gives you a chance to even up scores with that skinny rascal?" smiled Yellowhammer, but with a furtive look from face to face, as though he wanted to sound his way before committing himself too deeply.

"Not a whit to me!" hardly uttered Clay, with a venomous glow in his dark eyes as his bony fingers closed tightly, then opened, working as if he already had his hated enemy by the throat. "I'd made up my mind to put out his

light on my own account, but if you're willing to call it a favor to you, and willing to put up for the job, so much the better for my pocket!"

"You're too quick, mate!" growled Shortlip, with a warning kick at the shins of his gaunt partner. "If it was Sam Cary, now—"

Yellowhammer Jones quickly cut him short.

"Drop that, Luke, if you please! Cary saved my life at the risk of his own—and it's his good money that's paying for this very berth—and I'll listen to nothing against him from even good friend and old mate as you have been and still are. Mind you," quickly, as the vengeful blackleg uttered a growl and started as though to leave the narrow room; "I'm not saying anything against your trying to even up with Top-Sawyer Sam. All I hold out for is that you don't make me your confidant in the matter."

"But about this Mobbs," cut in Clay, who seemed to think that by far a more agreeable matter for discussion. "What has he been up to? Why are you down on him? Who is he, anyway? We picked him up for an angel with golden feathers, but—"

Yellowhammer Jones laughed harshly, yet as though the expression tickled his fancy amazingly.

"A fallen angel, then! Who is he? Recently the clerk of a lawyer in St. Louis, and only less a scoundrel than his employer. As to what he is: most confoundedly in my way, just at present!"

"Kick him out, why don't you?" growled Shortlip. "Just as I'll do, if he crosses my path any where between here and Orleans."

"He's only going as far down as Vicksburg, unless I'm widely out of my guess," slowly uttered the gambler, his brows contracting, his face growing white and stern, yet with a plainly puzzled expression upon it, as keen-eyed Clay mentally decided. "What we do must be accomplished between here and that town. Time enough, though, if you agree to accept my terms, and do your work in the old neat style."

"There's more in this than you're willing to show up, partner," nodded Clay, as the other paused. "You don't often make two bites at a mouthful of his size; then why don't you drop him yourself?"

Again there was a plain hesitation, though when he did speak the words flowed fluently enough.

"Well, for good reasons. One of those reasons is that somehow Top-Sawyer Sam appears to have picked the rascal up; you need hardly be told that, though," with a short, meaning laugh that brought a flush to the face of one and a vicious oath from the lips of the other. "And though I don't advertise to be a saint, or anything near one, after what Cary did this day for me, I can't risk an open row with him; don't you see the point?"

"All of which don't show up the real game," grinned Clay, his curiosity still further excited by the evident reluctance of Yellowhammer Jones to show his hand plainly. "What's in the wind? What is that skinny ghost trying to do that sticks in your craw?"

"That don't matter, does it, as long as I'm willing to pay you big money for paying off the score you owe the fellow?" frowned the other.

"Time enough for that, after all," was the quiet retort. "As you say, Cary seems to have taken the rascal under his protecting wing. And I'm just as anxious as you can be to keep out of a mess with him, though possibly for another reason," with a faintly hidden sneer.

"Well, in brief, this imp is carrying news to Vicksburg that may knock my hopes of quartering a fortune endways, if he gets safely to the end of his journey. More than this you don't need to know; you won't know, if I have to do the job with my own hands."

The concluding words came with a sharp emphasis that warned Green Clay not to tempt fortune too far, and with the skill of a practiced gambler he instantly changed his line of play to meet the emergency.

"That's more like old times, mate! And now you've shown up, just put in plain words what you want done. Is it clean work, or just a botch?"

"Clean work! Farrington Mobbs must never reach Vicksburg in fit condition for telling what he has discovered by his prying and eavesdropping!" muttered Yellowhammer Jones, his eyes glowing venomously.

CHAPTER XIII.

DROPPING A WORD OF WARNING.

IT only needed a glance into those keen eyes, that hardset face, to assure the blacklegs that Yellowhammer Jones meant every word he uttered in thus dooming Farrington Mobbs to extinction. And even Luke Shortlip, whose lust for revenge was principally turned toward Top-Sawyer Sam, gave a grunt and nod of satisfaction. To reap both revenge and a monetary reward was double comfort to their injured feelings.

"It's done—all but the doing," nodded Green Clay, slipping the ugly bowie-knife into momentary view; the same weapon which Top-Sawyer

Sam had deprived him of for a brief space in Social Hall.

Yellowhammer Jones hesitated for a brief space, but then shook his head in disapproval of this bit of pantomime.

"He's got to go, but not after that fashion, mates. Fresh blood is a mighty ugly thing, and talks terribly loud, even under the most favorable circumstances; but a blur of red paint from his veins, after what has occurred to-day, would be as good as an order for a hemp necktie for each one of us—don't you see?"

Luke Shortlip scowled blackly. Green Clay stared open-eyed for a brief space, his countenance gradually growing grimly serious as he seemed to drink in the full meaning of the gambler's objections.

"You must recognize the danger!" with an impatient frown. "If he was to be discovered with throat slit or a bit of window set in his heart, what would be the first question? Just this: Who had cause for wishing him out of the world? And what would the answer be?"

"Whatever the answer, it'd point mighty close to us, sure as you live and breathe."

"But they couldn't prove anything," frowned Shortlip.

"Would they stop to look for proof positive?" laughed Yellowhammer Jones, seeming to gain confidence and spirits as his tools test their own. "Hardly, with Sam Cary to head the gang. Afterward—when you had served as plummets long enough to take the kinks out of the rope—they might find leisure for something of the sort; but that would give little consolation to your mourning friends."

Green Clay forced a short laugh, though it was clear enough he failed to realize the mirthful aspect of this picture.

"Well, you haven't hired us to plan as well as execute. Tell us how you prefer the job's being jobbed, and call it settled."

Yellowhammer Jones, sitting on the edge of the lower berth, dropped his head upon a hand for a brief space, staring at vacancy, while his sharp teeth audibly nipped his nails. Neither Green nor Shortlip interrupted his reflections. They knew that when he was ready to talk business, they would hear from him in no uncertain tones.

This was not the first ugly transaction in which they had played partners, though Yellowhammer Jones was a grade or two above them, in the eyes of their world, if not in conscience or rectitude. They knew that he would keep his word to the letter, and that they ran no risk in accepting that word as his bond.

Yellowhammer Jones lifted his head after a brief space, his face still harder to the eye, his voice low, but full of an almost deadly intensity as he uttered:

"The skeleton has got to be lost before the boat reaches Vicksburg, even though we all risk our necks in a noose. Still, if we play our cards right, there will not be so much danger. He must tumble overboard in the dark!"

The two blacklegs interchanged swift glances, but said nothing.

"There will be some risk, but not much," added Yellowhammer Jones, seeming to read their doubts aright. "We have this night and to-morrow night, at least, and surely that is enough for our wants."

"If we can catch an opening, of course!" muttered Green Clay.

"We'll make one," with a sharp nod. "We'll get at him in his state-room, and silence him. Not by steel or bullet; there mustn't be any ugly proof left behind to answer the questions his friends may feel inclined to ask when the bundle of bones fails to put in an appearance. A tight grip on the rascal's throat—a snug gag, and a bit of stout lashing on hoofs and paws—then a drop over the guards into the river! What could be easier?"

"Nothing—if we once catch the right lead," grimly commented Shortlip.

From beyond the closed door came the deep rumbling of the second gong, announcing supper, and Yellowhammer Jones rose from his seat on the edge of the berth, hurriedly muttering:

"We'll arrange the details after supper. Out and around on the guards! We can't afford to give even the shadow of excuse for suspicion, by acting out of the ordinary run. Meet me on deck after grub!"

The two blacklegs slipped through the shuttered door, and closing it after them, Yellowhammer crossed his narrow state room, emerging into the brightly lighted cabin where the long tables were already being rapidly filled with hungry passengers.

Calm, composed, showing slight traces of his recent narrow escape from death, unless it might be in his garments—he had bought or borrowed a coat to replace the one lost in the river—the marooned gambler dropped into place at the table, seemingly making the best of fate.

An apparently careless glance showed him the graceful figure and handsome face of Top-Sawyer Sam, far up the table, near the division between the ladies' cabin and that set apart for the gentlemen who were single or unaccompanied by a member of the fair sex. The same

glance failed to show him aught of Farrington Mobbs, and another, at a later period, convinced him that the lawyer's clerk was not at supper.

Just the ghost of a smile stirred his blonde mustache, and a lurid light flashed into his blue eyes as they dropped to his plate.

"Taken alarm, eh, Mobbsy?" he mentally muttered. "You think to give me the slip by hugging your pillow until we whistle for Vicksburg? All right! Stick to that line of play, and I know who'll win the game!"

Although chance placed both Luke Shortlip and Green Clay near him at table, Yellowhammer Jones paid them no attention, as though they were perfect strangers. Nor did he utter word or give signal as he passed them by in leaving the table; but within an hour from that time, the trio were slowly moving from side to side of the boat, on deck near the stern, engaged in conversation which had Farrington Mobbs for a prime object.

Suddenly the gambler uttered a half-stifled curse as he caught sight of a tall, graceful figure approaching along the gravel-covered planks, and at a muttered word both Clay and Shortlip left him alone.

The new-comer was Top-Sawyer Sam, who cast a keen, suspicious glance after the retreating shadows as he drew near the gambler.

"Sorry to drive away your friends, Mr. Jones," he said, without attempting to conceal the scorn with which the two blacklegs inspired him, "but as I have a word of warning to drop in your ear, I improve the first fair chance I have met."

"Hardly friends," softly smiled the gambler, in correction. "I have met the fellows before, but—let them pass. You intimated—?"

"I said I had a word of warning to drop into your ear, and here it is, blunt and to the point," was the cold response, as the two men stood face to face under the clear moonlight. "There's a fellow aboard, calling himself Farrington Mobbs. For some reason he believes you mean him evil, and he has begged me to see him safely through to Vicksburg."

"I know the fellow by sight," was the calm response. "I even did him the honor of kicking him away from a keyhole through which he was spying, one day. But as to repeating the action—let him keep away from my door, and I'll hardly go out of my path to correct him."

It was admirably played, but Top-Sawyer Sam was not to be diverted from the line he had marked out. Colder than ever came his tones:

"It is a prick rather than a kick the poor devil expects from your quarter, Yellowhammer. Mind you, I'm not saying that his fears are founded on fact. He may be crack-brained and a crank, as he looks. But he made a square appeal to me to see him safely through to Vicksburg, and I gave him my word that I'd do it. And as it is *you* he fears most, to you I come with this bit of warning."

"I hope you are dealing on the level. I trust there is no good cause for Mobbs taking such an ugly view of the matter, but since he does—I'll say just this much:

"If anything should happen to the old man between here and Vicksburg, I'll look you up to ask what you know about the affair. Mind you, Yellowhammer, I don't want to bother about the matter, for it's rather outside my line of business; but unless you can show perfectly clean hands in such a case, you'll be mighty apt to hear something drop—and that something will be your own sweet self!"

Without waiting to receive an answer, Top-Sawyer Sam turned on his heel and strode forward to the pilot-house, through the glass doors of which he stepped, leaving Yellowhammer Jones looking after him with a smile that was anything but amiable. And the gambler muttered:

"Go slow, Sam Cary, or you'll be the one to take a tumble! You saved my life, but—you'll lose your own if you crowd in here!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MORE LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT.

BOYD ASHBY looked fully as dangerous as his words sounded just then, as he held that skulking figure covered with a wide-bored pistol, and though his voice was not lifted much above its natural pitch, he was understood with almost ludicrous promptitude. Up went the hands, and a husky voice came quavering through the shadows:

"Don't shoot! It's only me! Curse it all, man—"

A breath of relief broke from the lips of Boyd Ashby, and he dropped his pistol-arm, though still clasp the weapon with finger on trigger as he muttered:

"It's you, Hump Majors?"

"It's me, I reckon," in a relieved tone, as the shadow came forward and lowered its hands to an easier position. "Curse it, mate, what made you flare up like that? It brought my gizzard clean up into my throat, and I thought I was a gone goslin—like poor Dick!"

"What brought you skulking along like some

red-skin trying to get close enough to slip a knife into a fellow's ribs then?" scowled Boyd Ashby, revealing a side of his nature until now carefully hidden from our view.

The ruffian laughed softly, but with a thinly-disguised meaning underlying his manner and his words as he responded:

"Maybe I wasn't quite certain it was you. Maybe I wasn't dead sure you wouldn't try to give me the dirty shake if I let you sight me at too great a distance. Maybe—"

Boyd Ashby frowned blackly, cutting him short with an impatient gesture as he growled forth:

"What do you mean by that, Hump Majors?"

"Nothing to cause you to jump over the traces, boss," still with that thinly-disguised insolence underlying his oily, disagreeable smoothness. "Nothing so mighty strange, when you come to look at the way things have panned out. There's poor Dick—"

"Drop that, you scoundrel!" with an uneasy glance around them, like one who fears being eavesdropped. "What happened more than you agreed to, I'd like to know? Didn't you yourself give the first hint that it would be a double card to drop that brute cold?"

There was something sickly in the smile which played uneasily on the fat face of the rascal as a ray of early moonlight fell athwart his countenance, and there was just a trace of unsteadiness in his tones as he made reply:

"I ain't kicking so much about that, though—it was an awfully disagreeable sight—a blood-curdling look I saw on the poor devil's face when I stole back after you left with the girl!"

"Did you crawl here just to tell me this?" sulkily growled Ashby.

Hump Majors stole a half-sidelong glance into his dark face before speaking again, and there was something of suspicion in his tone:

"And as I stood looking down at Dick, I couldn't help remembering how mighty close your lead whistled past my own ears! So close that if I hadn't known better, I could almost have taken oath you were shooting for something more than a sham."

"But you *did* know better, curse you for a growler!" grated Ashby.

"There's the ugly whir of the lead ringing in my ears, even yet!"

Boyd Ashby thrust the pistol into his breast, grasping the squat ruffian by the shoulder, turning him so the moon shone full into his face, staring at him with eyes that gave out the greenish light which marks the feline race in darkness. And his voice, though low, was full of stern menace as he ejaculated:

"What are you trying to get through you, Hump? Have you come here to pick a row with me? Do you mean to even hint that I would play you foul in this game? If so—"

He did not complete the sentence in words, but the evil glow in his eyes, the sharp, vicious click of his strong teeth, left little for the imagination to fill in. And stout, reckless ruffian though Hump Majors was, he cowered under that fierce grip and steady glare.

"I didn't mean anything—I only wanted to settle up with you as soon as might be," muttered the fellow, shrinking before his employer; for employer he had been, as those words plainly indicated.

With a short, hard laugh, Boyd Ashby cast him off, brushing his hands as though they felt contaminated by that contact.

"In other words, you thought you would hang on to the grip you fancy I've given you, eh?"

"I wanted the money you promised me if we did our share of the work," sulkily muttered Majors, his little eyes glittering viciously, though as yet they feared to meet that greenish gaze.

"You couldn't wait until morning, even?"

"I could wait, of course, but how was I to know when and where to find you? There wasn't anything said about waiting, and after what came to poor Dick—"

"Stick a pin right there, my fine fellow," curtly interposed Boyd Ashby, tapping the squat ruffian on the shoulder sharply. "What happened more than you fully understood when I first hired your services?"

There was no response. Majors moodily stared at the ground, digging a heel into the green turf. Thorough rascal though he undoubtedly was, this unexpected reception clearly disconcerted him. Instead of meeting on a common footing, as he had flattered himself—with the advantage just a little on his own side, in fact—he was snubbed and threatened with even worse treatment.

Clearly as though his tool had put these thoughts into plain speech, Boyd Ashby read his reflections, and a cold, contemptuous smile curled his lips and added to the vivid glow in his dark eyes.

"You've been drinking too much, my fine fellow," he said, bluntly. "You've been bracing up the impudence you mistake for courage, and came here flattering yourself I'd vince under the screws as you clapped them on. Right there you fooled yourself, bad!"

"All I wanted was my pay," growled Majors, with a fleeting glance into the face of his master. "I've done the work you lined out, and of course I expect you to keep your part of the bargain."

"So you say now, but if I had showed even the ghost of a white feather, would you have been content to stop at that?" half-laughed Boyd Ashby, his manner a little more friendly, yet still far from comfortable to the fellow who cowered before him in the mingled moonlight and shadow. "Bah! you poor ass! I read your thoughts at the first glance! Your face betrayed you, Hump, and your whining tongue can't lie you out of it."

"You thought you held me in the hollow of your fist, too tight even to squirm when you put on the grip. You thought all you had to do was to bristle up and crow aloud for me to droop tail and admit your mastership; to meekly pay for my folly in trusting you, through the nose!"

Majors muttered something which was intended for a denial, but it was impatiently brushed aside as worse than in vain. Even at the expense of recalling his own thorough wickedness, Boyd Ashby was resolved to read his tool a lesson which would last for all time.

"Do you think I failed to take account of all possible chances for and against, before I tackled you, you fat rascal? If so, you're a monstrous poor judge of human nature! I was pressed for time, it is true, but I had a mighty wide circle of knaves to select from, and I hit on you quite as much because I knew I could make you listen to reason by fair means or foul, even easier than I could another. You would do your share of the work, and after that—just as you see!"

"If you won't believe me—"

"I couldn't if I was to try until I broke my neck," with a cold laugh. "I know you came here, counting on squeezing me. I know you congratulated yourself on having found a goose to lay eggs of gold for you whenever you lifted a finger in command. Instead, you find I am master as well as employer."

"At least you'll pay me the amount agreed upon? Poor and mean as you try to make me out, I could raise an unhealthy racket around these parts if I chose to tell the true story of your wonderful rescue!"

"Of course I will pay you, but not any sooner because of your impudent threats," was the cold retort. "I'll pay you the sum I said I'd give you fellows in partnership. I told you as much when you first hinted that it wouldn't come amiss if I were to really drop Dick—"

"Let that slide, boss!" muttered Majors, with a shivering glance over his shoulder, as though he more than half expected to see his dead partner come stalking through the shadows, to claim his reward and his revenge on his faithless comrades in sin.

But Boyd Ashby was merciless when he held the upper hand, and he was resolved to so thoroughly cow this impudent tool as to forever put an end to his dreams of extorting blackmail.

"You offered to find a mate for the job I had in hand. You were ready to answer for his carrying out his part of the contract, and then you hinted that it would make my act of rescuing the lady look more like the pure quill if this mate of yours was to be dropped cold. And when you mentioned Dick Crump as the fellow you had in your eye, I was willing enough to chime in with your ideas. Why? Simply because Dick knew me too well," with a low, meaningful laugh.

Hump Majors shivered uneasily. He could hardly mistake the meaning concealed beneath those words, and he wondered if he, too, would not be regarded as "knowing him too well."

"Not if you stick to your place, my good fellow," said Ashby, reading his thought aright. "Dick had a tight grip on me, which you haven't. Dick could laugh at my anger if he saw fit to pinch me, while you can't do that. So, as long as you serve me without trying to deal yourself a double hand, just so long are you sure of a good paymaster and generous."

As though to emphasize this statement, Boyd Ashby took from an inner pocket a comfortably-filled wallet, extracting therefrom a number of bank-notes, which he handed to Majors, adding:

"There's the amount I agreed to give you two for carrying out the plot I invented. You can take care of Dick's share. And here—to wipe out that scare his face gave you, back yonder."

Hump Majors eagerly grasped the money, mumbling his thanks for the addition and seemed far more at his ease than shortly before.

Boyd Ashby smiled quietly as he saw this, for it was precisely the end for which he was aiming, now that he had read the fellow his lesson. He felt that Majors would hardly make such another blunder, and he knew that he might require his services again before the game which he was playing could be said to be fairly his own.

"It may be that there's more money where that came from for you, my man, though everything appears to be working smoothly just now. At any rate, you'll lose nothing by keeping within easy call; say at the town, yonder. With money in your fist, you can worry out a few days, even if I shouldn't have to call on you

again. If I should, I'll know where to look for you."

"All right, boss," chuckled Majors, crowding the folded bills deep down in his pocket, but suddenly adding, with an almost ludicrous change of face at the startling thought: "What if the lady should point me out? What if she should make such a stir that I'd get nabbed?"

"If there is a stir, I'll be holding the stick, and you run no risk of being disturbed," was the quick response. "If any chance points in your direction, I'll let you know in ample time to jump the town."

"And Dick—shall I—must I look after him?" hesitated Hump Majors, with a shiver of reluctance and fear combined.

"I'll look after him. Maybe send out a squad of slaves to look it up, or else—"

Boyd Ashby broke off abruptly, whirling about on his heels with a fierce, grating oath as a sharp crackling sound came to his ear.

And swifter still, Hump Majors sprang past him, plunging into a dense mass of bushes, grappling with a cowering human figure which he found there, snarling and growling like a hungry wild beast.

For an instant or two, Boyd Ashby stood as though petrified, but then he sprang forward and grappled with the two men, dragging them both from the bushes, out where the rays of the moon fell upon them.

"Uncle Zero!" he panted, turning pale as death at the discovery.

"Kill him! knife him!" panted Majors, venomously.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW THE LITTLE GAME WORKED.

FARRINGTON MOBBS was hardly an object for envy during the hours that followed the arrival of Yellowhammer Jones on board the Old Hickory. Dearly as he loved gold, the skinny lawyer's clerk loved his life still better, and from the moment when he recognized the marooned gambler, he felt that his life hung by a hair, as it were.

Matters improved a little after he plucked up courage enough to beg the aid and countenance of Top-Sawyer Sam. This was the first time he remembered having come into contact with that personage, though he had, as was natural, his employer having considerable to do with shipping matters, heard more or less about the dashing sport who reigned as River Rex.

That he was an ally to be courted, the manner in which he disposed of the two river blacklegs was ample evidence, but after his stinging contempt shown toward himself during that same dispute, would it be possible to win him over?

The very fact of his making the attempt is proof enough that Farrington Mobbs was half crazed with personal fear.

The lawyer's clerk lay in his bunk with locked door, listening to the musical clatter of knives and plates, hungrily sniffing in the appetizing odors which were wafted in through the open transom. Despite his hunger, he dared not venture forth lest that terrible Yellowhammer Jones fall upon him and crush out his life before Top-Sawyer Sam could interfere in his behalf.

There was one faint consolation left him, and a cunning smile came into his withered, foxy visage as he cherished it.

"It's all my own secret, as yet! All my own to sell for the biggest price I can get for it! I thought he would show greater curiosity—ask more questions! I expected to have to tell him the whole story. But now—maybe I can give him the slip when he sees me safe to Vicksburg, and—"

Contemptible rascal as he was, Farrington Mobbs felt ashamed to complete the sentence, even in his own mind.

Cool, easy, unconcerned though he appeared to the outward eye, Top-Sawyer Sam kept a pretty close watch over the movements of the two blacklegs, as well as Yellowhammer Jones, after giving the marooned gambler that word of warning. And as though he was secretly aware of this espionage, Jones managed to make his chosen tools understand that nothing was to be attempted that night, without running the risk of being caught again in conversation with them.

There was little out of the usual routine aboard the boat, and still less that calls for more than a passing notice in this connection. There was some card-playing, but it was mainly for amusement and to kill time. The boat made one landing, to put off and take on freight during the night, but that was all.

The lesson read Green Clay and Luke Shortlip appeared to have borne fruit, since those worthies kept quiet and reserved even through the next day.

"Too mighty quiet for the good of honest people," nodded Elegant West, in an aside to Top-Sawyer Sam. "They're storing up poison for your especial benefit, Cary; look out that they don't slip in a bite at your heel from the grass!"

The River Rex laughed lightly as he made response:

"I drew their fangs last evening. It'll take

time to grow a fresh set, and I'll try not to worry myself into a decline while waiting."

Once or twice during the course of the day Top-Sawyer Sam dropped in on Farrington Mobbs for a few moments, but it may be doubted whether those visits were not more uncomfortable than cheering, lightly though the King of the River spoke of the danger which, right or wrong, the lawyer's clerk saw impending over his head.

Farrington Mobbs had a secret which he believed would bring him in a comfortable penny, if he could only carry it to the right market. He feared Top-Sawyer Sam might insist on knowing precisely what he had hinted at during the outburst of terror which had driven him to seek a guardian for the trip. In every careless question, in every reference to the matter, he scented a cunning trap, and while doing his best to evade these, he had to avoid offending the gambler, lest he be abandoned to the tender mercy of Yellowhammer Jones.

Thus see-sawing, Farrington Mobbs let more escape him than he intended or realized, it may be. At all events, Top-Sawyer Sam learned enough to deeply interest him, and to smother his dislike for the living skeleton sufficiently to take him fairly under his wing.

Once or twice he had the old man out on the hurricane-deck, sunning himself and drinking in the fresh, pure air, for early though the season still was, the atmosphere of the narrow state-rooms was close and oppressive when both doors had to be kept closed.

And when the gong rumbled out its welcome invitation to table, Top-Sawyer Sam would wait hard by for Farrington Mobbs to emerge from his retreat, and side by side they would enjoy the good things of life; though whenever the lawyer's clerk caught a glimpse of either the blacklegs or Yellowhammer Jones, he would shiver as though in the midst of an icy draught.

This may have been the warning of a subtle instinct, for, quiet and careless as the gamblers seemed, they were by no means idle. Yellowhammer Jones was not frightened off his track by the word of warning dropped in his ear by Top-Sawyer Sam. As he said, there was a great fortune hanging in the balance, and if he won a share of it, Farrington Mobbs must never reach Vicksburg in condition for telling of the discoveries he had made through sneaking and spying and eave-dropping.

Watching his chance, he called first one and then the other of his tools into his state-room, by way of the guards' entrance, making clear to them the scheme which he had decided upon.

"It's simple enough, after the first steps are taken," he explained. "The fellow is sure to be at supper, and you've seen how long it takes him to fill his skeleton frame. Long enough for you to fix his outside door so that you can easily get at the bolts to-night. No fear of interruption at that hour; you can work without regard to that or noise, and still have ample time to show up at table in case Cary has an eye out for you."

"We can cut the slats, but won't the rascal notice what's been done when he turns in?" hesitated Green Clay.

"Hardly, if you do the work as it should. Score the slats nearly through with the point of your knife, leaving them in place, but so you can snap them out without making any noise to speak of. Then you can draw the bolts and have a hand on his skinny throat before he knows what's going on."

After all it promised to be an easy enough job, and the amount they were promised by Yellowhammer Jones was sufficiently large to urge them to much greater risk, to say nothing of "getting even" with the prime cause of their trip down the river being ruined as a speculation.

"And after skinny-bones is playing food for the fishes, who's to point us out as the ones who had a finger in his disappearance?" laughed Green Clay, rubbing his hands in high glee over the prospect. "The old man's gone; who shall say where and when and how? And if Top-Sawyer Sam should accuse us, innocent as we can prove ourselves, why shouldn't we grow indignant enough to drop him with bullet or steel? And who could blame us for that?"

"We'll play our cards for an alibi, and trust to luck for coming out of the game without any such difficulty," smiled Jones.

Everything seemed to flow in their favor. Farrington Mobbs was among the earliest to answer the supper-gong, and Yellowhammer gave the signal that sent both Clay and Shortlip to their work on the guards.

And when, barely a quarter of an hour later, while Farrington Mobbs was still busily appeasing his hunger under the wing of Top-Sawyer Sam, the blacklegs came to their places at table, a single glance assured Jones that they had completed their work.

Nor was this all. With the declining of the sun the heavens began to fill with dark clouds, portending a heavy storm of rain, if nothing more serious. Long before the supper was ended all without the cabins was dark and gloomy, though as yet there was no rain, and only an occasional mutter of thunder and a faint glow of lightning.

Under these circumstances it was natural

enough for Farrington Mobbs to shut himself up in his cabin, since measuring the hurricane-deck was out of the question, and his enemies would, of course, be in Social Hall or at the bar.

Yellowhammer Jones, while making no sign, used his eyes and reasoning powers freely.

"The rascal was too badly frightened to sleep much last night, and he'll not lie awake long. He'll turn in early. Of course, he'll look to the fastenings, and if he discovers what the lads have done he'll yelp out in his fright. If nothing is heard from there in two hours—"

A cold, vicious smile filled the hiatus his mutterings left.

He joined the company in Social Hall, looking quietly at the few card-tables, but declining to take a more active part, for lack of funds.

Meanwhile, Farrington Mobbs was acting pretty much as the gambler had reasoned. He dared not risk running up against his enemies by joining the company forward, and the loss of sleep was weighing heavily on him. So, carefully trying the lock and bolts, he lay down on his berth, simply removing his coat and boots, meaning to catch a nap of an hour or two, then seek an interview with Top-Sawyer Sam before retiring for the night.

Despite the grumbling and groaning of the steamer under the powerful impulse of its engines; in spite of the heavy thunder that now and again rent the air without; but a little time elapsed before the old man was soundly slumbering.

To awaken with a crushing weight lying across his chest—with a suffocating grip upon his throat that effectually shut off all outcry on his part—with glowing eyes seeming to scorch his eyeballs as they glared upward; to dimly recognize the ruthless face of Green Clay bending over him.

"Do you know me, skinny?" hissed the black-leg, savagely grating his strong teeth as though longing to bury them in the throat of his helpless victim. "It's me—the man you stole that hand on—the man you caused to be treated like an egg-sucking cur—the man who swore to even up with you though it brought his neck into a noose!"

"Cheese it, pard!" growled Luke Shortlip, his hands busily engaged in securing the feet of their captive with a strong coil of rope. "Shut off his wind, but don't sing out quite so loud. If anybody smokes us at this job—good-by, John!"

"I want him to know who he owes it all to," snarled the blackleg, savagely, over his shoulder, then turning again to the helpless wretch: "You know me? Good! We're going to tie you up, hand and foot, with a gag betwixt your lantern-jaws to keep out the water, then we're going to drop you overboard to poison the fishes. Do you understand that, boneyard? Do you understand that, you living skeleton?"

With an impatient growl Luke Shortlip pushed his mate aside, and thrust a prepared gag between the open jaws of their victim.

"Button up your lip, or I'll serve you with a mouthful of the same sort! I've said more'n once that you'd end in digging your own grave with your tongue, but I'm langed if you can play sexton for me!"

Green Clay laughed harshly, but moved aside to permit his comrade in evil to complete the task of binding the lawyer's clerk. He had said enough. He knew by the look of indescribable horror that came into the face of Farrington Mobbs that his fierce taunts had been understood, and in a few moments later he picked up the light figure and bore it out on the guards, just as a blinding flash of lightning came to dazzle their eyes.

Involuntarily they both staggered back, a sharp, startled ejaculation ringing in their ears; coming from a man who was just in the act of descending the steps leading from the hurricane-deck. For an instant each attributed that sound to the other, but then came a clear, stern voice which both recognized as that of Top-Sawyer Sam, demanding:

"What are you doing there, you rascals? Who are you and—Ha!" with a leap forward, crying: "Drop him—assassins!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"MAN OVERBOARD!"

YELLOWHAMMER JONES sought his state-room quite early that night, after heroically wrestling with a "chill" which was undoubtedly brought on by his long fight with the waters that had swallowed up his island, and which he vainly sought to counteract by steaming hot drinks which were compounded under his direction at the bar.

So admirably did he play his part that not even Top-Sawyer Sam for an instant suspected that it was but a bit of cunning, after all, and saw him beat a retreat with a mental congratulation that he would have one less rascal to keep watch upon that night.

In his state-room Yellowhammer Jones heard the faint crackling sounds that told him his tools were removing the nearly-severed slats in order to get at the bolts to draw them. From there he heard them open the door and enter the state-room.

And from thence, with his own door slightly ajar, he watched them come out on the guards with their helpless burden, and fairly held his breath as he waited for the sullen plunge of the doomed wretch, knowing that it would come with the next clap of thunder, that no alarm might be given the deck-hands below by the splash.

A vicious curse hissed through his clinched teeth as he heard the sharp challenge of Top-Sawyer Sam, who must have gained the hurricane-deck from the opposite side of the cabins; in all probability searching for the two black-legs to make sure they were up to no mischief.

For one instant he hesitated, like a flash recalling his own rescue by this man from certain death else. But only for an instant. He was playing a desperate game for high stakes, and as Top-Sawyer Sam sprang down the ladder, past his state-room, denouncing the ruffians, he leaped out behind him and swung a long, dark object up and down, with vicious force.

Startled though he was by this unexpected interruption, Green Clay was not to be cheated out of his revenge, now that it was fairly within his grasp, and quickly recovering, he hurled the helpless body over the guards, just as Top-Sawyer Sam, reeling before that treacherous blow from the man who owed him a life, hung for an instant over the low rail, then toppled sideways, shooting swiftly down through the darkness!

"Steady, lads!" grated Yellowhammer Jones, sharply; to grind a fierce curse betwixt his teeth as a wild, startling shout rose from the engine-deck, almost immediately beneath where they stood:

"Man overboard! Man overboard!"

Immediately after this wild cry, the boat seemed to fairly shake and shiver under a terrific burst of thunder, that rolled slowly along through the murky gloom above, like a thousand heavy guns passing at speed over a board-ed bridge.

Yellowhammer Jones caught his fellow-criminals in the dark, and lifted his voice so they could catch his words through the sullen roar that was passing down the river, still almost deafening in its volume:

"Divide and show yourselves with the crowd! That alarm will be repeated, and we've got to—"

Even as he spoke that thrilling shout came again from the lower deck, and spread throughout the entire steamer. From deck to cabin, from Social Hall to the ladies' salon the cry was repeated; only less electrifying than the cry of fire itself!

Not daring to say more or lose another moment, Yellowhammer Jones tore open his vest with one hand as he dashed through his state-room, tumbling his long hair like one just from a pillow, joining the excited crowd as the passengers rushed to ascertain with more clearness what had really caused the alarm.

Already the trained river-men were at work, some casting planks and sticks of cordwood overboard, in hopes of thus lending support to the unfortunates—for one of the deck-hands solemnly declared that as he was drawing a bucket of water, two human bodies shot down past him, almost within arm's length, one swiftly following the other—and others hastily kindling the fat knots in the massive fire-crates, to partially light up the muddy waters.

There was no time to stop for asking who was missing. Already the boat must have passed far ahead of the luckless wretches, even supposing they were still afloat. For, with a shudder, more than one thought of what might have happened; of how that mighty wheel, rapidly churning the water into froth and foam with its massive "buckets," might have driven the luckless ones far below the surface, with broken bones and horribly mangled flesh!

It was more than probable, when the position of the deck-hand was pointed out, some distance ahead of the wheel-house. Far enough for even a heavy body to rise near enough to the surface to come within the sweep of that cruel piece of machinery.

"We'll do what we can, anyhow!" cried Captain Waters, hustling his men into the yawl, hurrying others with the fire-crates, and yelling to the engineer to reverse the machinery to avoid forging still further ahead of the floaters—if they were still afloat!

"Devil fear that!" chuckled Green Clay in the ear of his employer, under cover of the bustle and confusion. "Not a yelp from either!"

"Our man was too tight gagged!" grinned Luke Shortlip, "and the other—no names, mind!"

Yellowhammer Jones shivered a bit and his face looked truly ghastly in the light of the fire-crates that just then flashed upon him.

His sinewy right hand closed tightly as though he still grasped that deadly implement, even then in common use—the silent sand club.

Evil though he was, crime-stained and hardened by a lifelong career of sin, he felt a strange faintness at his heart as he stood glaring out over the limited circle of foaming waters lit up by the red light of the blazing pine-knots. He seemed to feel again the treacherous sand crum-

bling beneath his feet; the hungry waters tearing him from his frail hold upon life, burying him beneath their growling waves and ringing hideously in his ears. And the man who had so gallantly saved him from all this—hurled to meet a like fate by his hand!

For a single breath the gambler knew what it felt like to regret an act of criminal treachery; but scarce for longer than that.

"What made him chip in when it wasn't his put?" he snarled, speaking unconsciously above his breath.

"It couldn't have happened better!" laughed Luke Shortlip, with malignant joy in face and voice, knowing that in such confusion it was hardly likely any eyes would catch or ears comprehend his meaning. "Now, when the roll is called, who's to say the two devils didn't drown each other? Who's to even hint that we had a finger in the pie?"

Yellowhammer Jones quickly recovered a portion of his wits, and in guarded tones he warned his tools:

"It's possible that they may pick him up, alive—see!" with a hissing breath, as the fully-manned yawl shot out from the stern of the steamer. "If they should, we must be ready for action, or—"

"I'll blow a hole through him before he can point even a finger at us!" snarled Luke Shortlip, viciously.

"No, you won't!" with a dark scowl. "We'd meet with a hundred deaths in one, then! If he is rescued, we've got to hide below, among the freight, until we can steal the boat. If it comes to the worst, I'll slip overboard on a bale of cotton! Anything rather than be caught after such a charge as he can make if he comes back alive!"

The boat was now pointing its bow up-stream, the wheels revolving just fast enough to hold her against the current, waiting the result of the search in the gloom by the men in the yawl, though, as not a sound had come to the eagerly strained ears from the luckless ones, already hope was fading out of the most sanguine. Surely, unless stunned by the fall, or crushed to pulp by the massive paddle-wheel, a cry or appeal of some sort would have come to their hearing?

"It's just a waste of time and eyesight," grimly chuckled Green Clay, as he followed the erratic course of the yawl, marked by the white sheen of its lantern, though now far beyond the red circle cast over the yellow waters from the fire-crates. "But I'm not grumbling! I'm in no such rush just now! It's a scene well worth spending an hour or two in watching—knowing what we do!"

"Expend your joy while the excitement lasts, my fine fellow," Yellowhammer frowned, darkly. "It will fetch you to a tight noose if you allow any of it to be seen in your face when they abandon the search. And each one of our faces will have to stand a mighty close scrutiny, too, when roll is called."

"They can't lynch us on bare suspicion."

"They can put us ashore—or on a bar!" with a shiver as his memory turned back to his own hideous experience in that line.

Better hanging outright than a repetition of that!

Until long after all hope was lost, Captain Waters continued the search, rowing back and forth across the swiftly-running current, though he knew that any human body, if still afloat, must long since have been swept past the waiting steamer. Then, as the long threatening storm broke in good earnest, he silently motioned his men to return.

In gloomy silence the yawl was hooked fast, the hands climbed on board, and the Old Hickory turned its prow once more down-stream.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNCLE ZERO IN HARD LUCK.

ALTHOUGH useless so far as breaking away from his assailant was concerned, beyond a doubt his desperate struggles saved the life of Uncle Zero. It was all Hump Majors could do to hold the old negro in subjection and prevent him from raising an outcry which might easily result in bringing down upon the schemers a force too great for them to cope with, and though the ruffian kept up his vicious pantings, he was unable to use cold steel himself.

For a few moments Boyd Ashby seemed totally unmanned by this unexpected discovery, which might make all the difference between success and utter defeat.

Was it accident, or could it be deliberate intent that led Uncle Zero into spying upon him? How long had he been in that clump of shrubbery? How much had he heard?

Like magic there flashed across his mind all that had passed between himself and his ruffianly tool, and a vicious curse almost scorched his lips as he realized the truth: if his ears had caught anything, it was just that many words too much for Uncle Zero to carry to his young mistress!

He stooped and added his grip to that against which poor Uncle Zero was vainly struggling, and tough though the old fellow had proved himself, the end was not much longer delayed.

Hump Majors shook himself free, squatting back, panting, husky, uncertain-voiced from his efforts.

"Knife the snake! Slit his weasand, boss! Spying—heard all!"

For a single breath it seemed as though Boyd Ashby would carry this sanguinary advice into execution. He bent over the nearly senseless negro, an ugly-looking blade gleaming faintly in his hand as it quivered in the shimmering moonlight. For a single instant Uncle Zero hung over a bloody grave; but then came a change.

Boyd Ashby gave a start, shaking his shoulders with a mechanical effort not unlike that of a dog when it rids its coat of water after a swim. He still clutched the knife, but its point no longer hung over the half senseless negro.

"Shall I play butcher, boss?" came hoarsely from Hump Majors, as he noticed this hesitation and interpreted it wrongly. "He's heard too much to be turned loose, and it's only a nigger, anyway!"

Boyd Ashby made no answer in words, though he shook his head sharply at the squat ruffian who already had his knife out in the uncertain light, merely awaiting permission from his employer to slit a throat with as little compunction as he might have shown in killing a fat hog.

"It's that or run—for me, anyway!" growled the ruffian, scowling until his fat cheeks fairly eclipsed his pig-like eyes. "He knows too much! He's heard you call my name, and—"

An impatient gesture cut him short, and as Uncle Zero made a feeble effort to regain his feet, Boyd Ashby dropped a hand upon his throat and hurriedly crammed a handkerchief into his jaws with his other, at the same time giving the harsh warning:

"Try to yelp out, and I'll slit your throat until your head drops off, you black scoundrel! Give even a kick, and it'll land you in the middle of Tophet!"

With a gurgling moan Uncle Zero ceased his worse than useless efforts, cowed despite his courage by those tigerish eyes that seemed to fairly burn their way into his poor brain.

"Try to understand what I'm telling you, Uncle Zero," added Boyd Ashby, slackening his grip upon the victim's throat a trifle, while with his free hand he caused his venomous-looking blade to quiver and glimmer close before the negro's eyes. "Try to comprehend that your life hangs on a hair. That at the first yelp or kick from you I'll butcher you cleaner than ever you slaughtered a fattened hog at Christmas-time!"

What with the hastily improvised gag and that clutch upon his windpipe, of course it was impossible for Uncle Zero to admit as much in words, but Boyd Ashby knew from the peculiar shiver that crept over the poor fellow that he both heard and understood.

He cast a glance over his shoulder in quest of Hump Majors.

"Ready, boss!" promptly muttered that worthy, who stood close at his employer's elbow. "Ready to do the trick for him—and it ought to be done in a hurry, too! Think what the sneaking critter must have heard, skulking there in the brush."

"Have you got anything about you that will serve to hitch up his arms for a bit?" sharply muttered Ashby, ignoring the sanguinary hint.

In sulky silence Majors produced a bit of leather thong, strong enough to serve the purpose, and as Ashby rolled the old man over he rudely twisted his arms behind him, binding them tight at the elbows.

"His feet don't matter so much just now," muttered Ashby, rising erect with another of those dog-like shakes. "Roll him into the shadow yonder, and we can keep an eye upon him while we settle what is the best course to pursue in this infernal dilemma."

"There'd trail the best and only one I can see!" doggedly growled Majors, with no remnant of his recent humility visible, talking and acting like one who feels this new peril has brought them both on a common footing.

Boyd Ashby frowned blackly, his strong teeth clicking together with an ugly sound as he cast a swift, apprehensive glance around him. For the first time in his excitement he wondered if there were other spies and eavesdroppers hidden by the dense coverts near by.

A muttered word sent Hump Majors stealing off through the shadows on a tour of inspection, while the dark schemer moved nearer Uncle Zero with knife bared and ready for use if need be.

Those few minutes were anything but pleasant ones for Boyd Ashby.

He was playing a desperate game for a great fortune, which lacked only a few short days of dropping safely into his covetous hands. He had grown to believe the game as good as won, when a wholly unexpected complication arose, causing him to work with hands and brain to save himself from complete defeat.

Up to this hour all had gone smoothly, and once more he was lulled to a sense of perfect security: only to have it broken by this prying, skulking spy and eavesdropper!

"It's all up with my game if he carries his discovery to her ears," he muttered, clicking his

teeth viciously. "If—I'll slit his fool throat to ribbons first!"

Hump Majors soon after returned to report that, to the best of his knowledge, they had only Uncle Zero to deal with. There was no one astir in their vicinity, and nothing to show that there had been a companion to the old negro.

"I can't even guess what made the black imp suspect anything crooked, but that he did, his creeping after me is proof enough."

"He needn't carry his news to living ears, boss," with a grin on his fat, repulsive countenance as he half-revealed his knife. "As for what he blurts out in spirit land, I don't reckon that'll make either of us lose much sleep!"

"Talk's cheap, but a carcass is a monstrous ugly thing to dispose of, when discovery would mean so much," frowned Ashby. "After all, he may not have heard anything to injure me at the house. He may just have got to the bush when he broke the dry stick that caught our ears. If so—he's too badly scared to've taken close account of what we said after gripping the rascal, and maybe I can smooth it over."

Hump Majors gave a snort of supreme disgust as he stared into the troubled face of his employer, searching in vain for a jest.

"If you're willing to risk it, all right, boss!" with a significant shrug of his massive shoulders. "As for me—I'm going to pull out for a healthier country, if you're bound to turn him loose."

"Wait until I sound the black rascal, at any rate," was the reply.

Boyd Ashby moved to the side of Uncle Zero, who was now fully conscious, but still so deeply frightened that his person shook like one in the light of an ague chill. The schemer bent over him, frowning and stern, his voice hard and menacing, as he muttered:

"What were you dogging me for, you old rascal? What led you to spy upon my steps? How long were you hidden in those bushes? Speak!"

An inarticulate gurgle was the sole reply, and with a growl at his own forgetfulness, Boyd Ashby tore the gag from the old man's jaws.

"Deed an' double 'deed, marse, I nebbah done nuffin' ob de kin!" gasped Uncle Zero, with a faint moan of mingled pain and terror.

"What were you doing in those bushes, you rascal?"

"Des—des—possum, marse! 'Fo' de Lawd, marse, des possum!"

"What did you hear us say? What did you catch? Look out, you black thief! If I catch you in a lie, I'll slit your throat from ear to ear!"

"Nebbah heah nuffin', boss," moaned the poor wretch, shaking like an aspen in a whirl of wind. "Nebbah heah nuffin'—nebbah tell Missee Berline dat—"

The poor fellow bit off his words, feeling, too late, that he had betrayed himself in his great terror. He strove to utter a scream for help as Boyd Ashby made a grab at his throat, hissing forth a venomous curse of scorching anger, but those muscular hands effectually cut short any outcry, and after a vicious choking, the gag was replaced in his mouth and Boyd Ashby sprung to his feet once more.

"I knowed it from the first, boss," muttered Hump Majors, with just the ghost of a smile upon his greasy features. "There's only one way through the tangle; and here's the bit of steel that's plenty sharp enough to cut the tangle in a holy second! Just say the word—"

Boyd Ashby made a swift gesture with his right hand, frowning dark as a stormy midnight as he cut the ruffian short with:

"I tell you that is out of the question! The rascal will be missed, and close search made for him. We might hide his carcass, and even hide from human eyes the trace of blood; but if the hounds are set to work—what, then?"

"It's risky, but live lips talk heap plainer than dead ones!"

"Look here, my man. I know you are ready to run any risk provided the pay is big enough. You must take the rascal and hide him some way. Can't you manage it? Can't you keep him under cover until—well, say for a week at least?"

Anxiously enough Boyd Ashby watched his tool while waiting for an answer to this proposal. Hump Majors seemed mighty dubious, as he himself would have shaped it, for a brief space, looking downward where his heel was scoring the sward in rude lines. But then, with a start and a sharp ejaculation, he looked up, a broad grin spreading over his fat face, just as though he had stumbled upon a satisfactory scheme.

"Kin I have all I make out of the job, besides the wage: you're willing to pay for my trouble and risk?" he asked.

"Get him out of my way—keep him out of the way for two weeks—and I'll give you the same amount I banded you a bit ago!"

"And not ask for a divvy?" persisted the ruffian, grinning broadly as though in hopes of blunting his speech a trifle.

"Of course not!" was the impatient response. "Sell him for soap-grease, if you like. Only—"

he mustn't leave any red tracks nigh enough to this place to give my game a crooked turn. Bear that in mind!"

"Don't you worry, boss," with an oily, disagreeable chuckle. "I was a most monstrous fool for ever thinking of slitting his throat, for a live nigger is heap better than a dead nigger in the market."

"What do you mean? Speak out plainly, you grinning ape!"

"That I'd be a precious idiot to kill a nigger I might sell instead," promptly responded Hump Majors, growing sorer in a hurry as he caught that ominous glitter. "That I know a nigger-trader who wants to make up a gang for 'way down South so mighty bad he won't stop to ask too many questions, especially if he's offered a good bargain. Uncle Zero is pretty old, but he's worth enough for the trouble, anyway!"

"You can trust this trader to keep a still tongue?"

"If it's to his interest, red-hot pincers couldn't make him give a yelp," confidently replied Majors. "May I—"

"Of course," was the quick response. "All I ask is two weeks more. Then—let him talk or creak, matters naught to me!"

"Get up, you cripple!" grinned Majors, jerking the trembling wretch to his feet, then flashing a knife before his eyes. "Walk chalk, nigger! Try to kick over the traces, and I'll work buttonholes all over ye!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE RIVER.

THE unwelcome appearance of Top-Sawyer Sam on the scene of action, that gloomy evening, came about much as Yellowhammer Jones reasoned.

The River Rex missed the two blacklegs, and having satisfied himself that they were not to be found below, hastened to the hurricane-deck, more than half expecting to find them again consulting with Yellowhammer Jones, and plotting evil against Farrington Mobbs. For, with the evening still so young, he did not think even such rascals would dare attempt "getting even" with the lawyer's clerk as yet.

He passed along the guards to the last ladder on that side, and having thoroughly searched the deck above without finding the men he sought, turned to the opposite side to complete the circuit. Thus it was that he happened upon the assassins, just as they were lifting their helpless victim to the rail.

That blinding glare of lightning showed him who they were, and what they intended doing, and without a thought of personal peril he sprung to the rescue.

He had a vague sense of a rushing figure close at his heels, but before he could even partially turn, that murderous sand-club descended upon his head, causing him to reel and fall against the rail, where he hung for a brief space before toppling over and shooting headlong through the darkness, to plunge deep below the surface of the river.

It may have been a sense of horrible ingratitude that weakened the arm of Yellowhammer Jones; it may have been that the stiff beaver hat worn by the River Rex deadened the force of the treacherous blow; but one or the other stood Top-Sawyer Sam in good stead just then. He was partially stunned, but not for a moment did he lose consciousness or his presence of mind in a serious degree.

Even as he felt himself shooting down to the water, a thought of that terrible wheel flashed across his whirling brain, and instead of struggling to regain the surface as quickly as possible, he feebly strove to drive his body still deeper than the heavy plunge would naturally carry him!

He felt his shoulder brush against some object, and as his hand swept past it he mechanically closed his fingers. Like an electric shock it flashed upon him that he had grasped the arm of Farrington Mobbs, and he tightened his grip convulsively as he heard a growing roar as of mighty thunder pouring down upon his partially paralyzed person, seeming to hammer and thump at his whirling brain.

Even then he knew what this meant: knew that the mighty wheel was revolving directly above them: knew that they were rapidly rising in the water toward it: knew that a touch of those heavy "buckets" meant death and horrible mutilation!

He kicked and thrashed desperately, striving to sink deeper into the muddy water, but feeling himself being dragged upward by the body to which he had instinctively fastened. He feared death with each moment, yet he would not loosen his vise-like grip on that quivering arm!

Of course, it was but an excited imagination, but it ever after appeared to him—as it appeared to his upset brain just then—that the terrible wheel hung suspended over his head for a full minute, each second of which seemed an hour in length with that sickening fear uppermost in his throbbing brain; with that horrible fear of being dashed and mashed and crushed to a heinous pulp by those whirling buckets!

Then he rose to the surface, gasping

breath, half-drowned by his long submersion, unable to utter a sound though he strained his lungs to do so. Yet through it all he clung to the arm of Farrington Mobbs, despite the wild, aimless struggles of that miserable wretch.

The waves born of those mighty wheels dashed into their faces, choking and strangling the River King despite his efforts to keep his head clear of them. And twice as he attempted to shout after the swiftly-receding boat, he was checked thus: a curling crest dashing full into his face and filling his mouth with water.

More than once Top-Sawyer Sam was plunged head under, more through the frantic struggles of poor Mobbs, who, in spite of the gag that kept his lungs from filling with water, was surely being strangled. More than once, had his brain been as clear as usual, the gambler would have abandoned the helpless lawyer's clerk to fight for his own life. But with something of the instinct of a drowning man, Top-Sawyer Sam clung closely to the very object which threatened to drown him in the end.

But his time was not yet come, and as a heavy object swept along, just brushing his side, Top-Sawyer Sam made a blind clutch, his fingers closing on a projecting stub. He was rudely jerked upward as the drift gave a roll to one side on the waves that swept diagonally away from the wake of the steamer, but his grip did not slip, and with his wits sharpened, his brain rapidly clearing, Top-Sawyer Sam was soon hanging with one strong arm over a huge trunk of a tree.

A few moments thus, gasping for breath and clearing his choked lungs, then a dull, lifeless tug at the end of his other arm reminded him of Farrington Mobbs. It was difficult work in his exhausted state, but Top-Sawyer Sam felt that he was working for life, and he managed to raise the bony figure—even in that breathless moment he found himself thanking Heaven that Mobbs had no more flesh upon his bones—out of the water and balance it, stomach downward, across the log.

This was no sooner done than a spell of deathly sickness seized upon him, and his head drooped to the rough, wet bark of the log to which he clung with a grip that death itself would have found it difficult to loosen. And all this time the steamer was swiftly flying down with the rapid current, while the log seemed to float even slower than the water which more than half submerged its length.

It was a curious chain of circumstances, all told, and there was yet another strange link even then being forged to complete the whole.

How long Top-Sawyer Sam lay thus in almost complete exhaustion he could never tell, but when he recovered sufficiently to lift his head and stare half-vacantly around him, the steamboat was far down the river, full of red light and intense confusion.

Even then the River Rex was several seconds trying to realize what had happened, only coming to a glimpse of the truth as his benumbed fingers slipped from their hold on the rough bark, sending him head below the curling waves that broke hissing against the obstruction.

A hasty struggle resulted in regaining the friendly float, and now comprehending the situation, though his brain was whirling and his wits astray, Top-Sawyer Sam looked eagerly toward the red lights, gathering his powers for one mighty hail. It came—only to be lost amid the crashing peal of thunder that seemed to split the heavens above!

Stunned, dazed by the brilliant glow of lightning that quickly followed that mighty peal, Top-Sawyer Sam clung to the log, his head drooping, his aching eyes closed. For longer than he realized that stupor lasted. Long enough for the strange link to be completed. Long enough to irretrievably shape the course of his life, it may be!

It was a hollow, choking groan from Farrington Mobbs that at length aroused the River Rex, and only glancing toward the red lights—now seemingly still further away, though in a different direction from when he last saw them—sending out a hoarse, prolonged shout that, even to his own ears, seemed almost stifled by the roaring of the river, Top-Sawyer Sam caught at the lawyer's clerk with one hand, which luckily touched the cords that bound the wretch.

Feeling for the bowie-knife which, in common with the great majority of river men of the day, he carried in a snug sheath inside his garments at the back of his neck, Top-Sawyer Sam found that it had remained safe through his watery struggle. In a very few moments he had cut the bonds, and in trying to set the poor devil astride the log, discovered the fact that his ankles were also fast.

All this consumed time, but Top-Sawyer Sam only gave passing looks toward the red lights, knowing that search was being made for them, and naturally enough counting on the current carrying them within sight. But when Farrington Mobbs, now conscious and able to follow orders, was fairly free and astride the log, Cary paused to take a more understanding look about them.

For a moment he stared, unable to believe the

evidence of his own eyes. Freeing a hand he brushed it swiftly across those organs, only to look again upon the same strange, astounding sight.

The steamboat was no longer below them, though still further away than at any moment since their involuntary plunge into the river! And yet it did not seem possible that they could have floated unseen past the boat, while the fire-crates were blazing so fiercely. And—surely it was so! The current—

A moment's observation assured Top-Sawyer Sam of this: the current which swept them along, as it seemed, with increasing rapidity, was running at an angle which placed the boat almost directly opposite them, instead of half a mile above; though her reduced size would indicate at least that interval between them and her.

Something like an oath burst from his lips as a number of tall, indistinct objects passed between them and the red lights.

"That does settle it!" he grated, with a harsh, unnatural laugh. "We've left the river! We've been swept into a cut-off!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THROUGH CATFISH CUT-OFF.

FARRINGTON MOBBS gave a choked, gasping wail at this startled ejaculation, though it may well be doubted whether he really comprehended the meaning of Sam Cary's words in his then wretched state of mind and body.

Top-Sawyer Sam never even glanced toward him, his eyes riveted on the red flare that hung about the Old Hickory in the distance, seeming a bit of blood-red haze as the heavy gloom enveloped and strove to smother it.

Even yet he was loth to believe what instinct rather than reason had revealed to his whirling, disturbed brain. Even now he sought to brush away the deceiving mist from his eyes.

But the effort was worse than useless, and his breath came quicker and harder as both steamer and its nimbus of red lights were blotted out as if the storm-curtain had suddenly dropped between. To reappear for a few seconds, then to fade away again; but this time with a slow deliberation that proved the truth beyond all possibility of doubt.

"I knew it!" the River Rex muttered, more to himself than for the purpose of enlightening his companion. "Look at the trees—look at the limb and leaves!"

Despite the intense gloom born of the impending storm, the two men could see that a widening line of timber was stretching between them and the steamboat. Against that dull red haze, they could even distinguish leafy branches and bare limbs. Then—the boat was blotted out from their vision, this time to reappear no more!

Not all at once would Top-Sawyer Sam acknowledge this. During those early minutes he was far from being himself. His brain, while appearing to be in a state of abnormal activity, was really thick and confused, incapable of clear reasoning or prompt decision. That treacherous stroke dealt by the man whose life he had plucked from the very jaws of grim death, had affected him far more seriously than he as yet realized.

He tried to pierce the gloom for several minutes, hoping against hope that the red light would shoot into view again, revealing the good boat and its searching crew; but then, forced to realize the truth, he shook his wits together and cried to his mate on the float:

"We're in a cut-off, dead sure! Every moment is sweeping us still further from the old boat and a rescue. We've got to strike out for dry land, over yonder, and yell for the yawl. Ready, old fellow?"

Farrington Mobbs groaned in bodily and mental anguish as he lay along the swaying, bobbing trunk, digging his skeleton-fingers into the rough bark with the grip of despair.

"I can't—I can't swim a lick!"

"Then I'll carry you," bluntly cried Top-Sawyer Sam, only to stop short, with a sudden sense of his own disability.

Could he reach the land, even though unincumbered with that groaning, moaning lump of wretchedness? His arms and legs felt dull and heavy, as though his flesh was bruised and half paralyzed. It pained him as he filled his lungs with air, pressing against the rough trunk.

He could only guess their distance from sound footing, but he now noted the rapidity of the current which was sweeping them along through the darkness. He could hear the swirls and boils roar sullenly in his ears, and past experience told him how hard these were for even a perfectly sound swimmer to fight and conquer. In the blackness, with saturated garments dragging like leaden weights, incumbered by a terrified wretch who could not or was too badly demoralized to even try to swim, what would be the result?

Death!

All this flashed across his clearing brain with wondrous rapidity, and Farrington Mobbs was still moaning and groaning in his terror when Top-Sawyer Sam, more like his usual self than at any time since his being hurled into the wa-

ter, dragged himself upon the floating log, his voice piercing the gloom between them:

"We'll stick it out on this line, then, old fellow! Brace up, and be a man as near as you can make out! Who says die?"

"Oh! it's awful! horrible!" moaned poor Mobbs, his words hardly distinguishable, so utter were the wretchedness and fear that held him.

"Worse than lying at the bottom of the Mississippi with everything tied up, and catfish nibbling at your nose? Get out, you croaker!" with a laugh that, forced though it was, sent a faint ray of hope into poor Mobbs. "What better can you ask for, man? Here we are, passage paid, and running a race for Vicksburg with the Old Hickory! Give you any reasonable odds that we'll be there to cheer them as they round to at the wharf?"

It was characteristic of the man that Top-Sawyer Sam hitched himself along the nearly-submerged trunk until he could touch Farrington Mobbs with his hands, ready to lend him support in case his terror should render him liable to drop off into the hurrying flood. For the moment his only thought was how to guard this poor wretch who was so unfit to care for himself.

He patted him on the bowed back, laughing and jesting at their situation, scouting at the idea of danger, declaring that when day dawned they would both look at the adventure as a jolly joke. He solemnly swore that he knew just where they were, and that long before dawn they would reach the river again, ready to hail the steamer as it came plowing down the current.

And his efforts were not all thrown away. Probably Top-Sawyer Sam was the only man living who could have inspired the craven wretch with anything like hope and courage in the midst of the storm which was now adding its discomforts to all the rest.

The heavens above them seemed to open wide to discharge its burden of rain. The water fell in blinding sheets, rather than single drops, causing even Top-Sawyer Sam to arch his broad back and bow his head. It smothered his voice at times, but as often he would encouragingly pat Farrington Mobbs on the back, as a signal to keep his spirits up.

That tremendous outburst lasted only through the first few minutes, though the rain continued to fall heavily for hours afterward. The wind was nothing to speak of, and with the coming of the rain, the awe-inspiring thunder bursts and lightning-sheets vanished almost entirely, as though the worst of the storm was rapidly sweeping over.

Almost an hour, counting the time during which the storm rendered his efforts so spasmodic, Top-Sawyer Sam devoted to "bracing up" his companion in misfortune, and not until he succeeded in this did he permit himself time to calculate their exact situation.

Of course eyesight availed him nothing in that intense darkness. He could only use his reasoning powers, aided and sharpened by a thorough knowledge of the river and its prominent features.

He knew pretty nearly where the steamboat was when the mishap befell them, and was not long in arriving at a solution of the mystery.

"We're sweeping down through Catfish Cut-off!" he assured Mobbs.

"To death!" groaned that wretched being, shivering violently as the log gave an unsteady pitch to one side as though caught in a whirlpool. "Better if you'd left me alone to—Ugh!"

"To triumph over those dastardly cur, you mean!" sharply cried the River Rex, his strong teeth clicking audibly above the sullen muttering of the muddy waters. "We'll fool 'em yet, old fellow!" forcing a cheering laugh as he patted Mobbs on the back once more. "We'll get even with them for our ducking, and put a spider into that precious pudding of Yellowhammer Jones and Boyd Ashby!"

And then, more to keep the lawyer's clerk from dwelling on their really precarious situation, Top-Sawyer Sam, with his lips close to the ear of his companion, and his strong arm resting about the bowed form, lending both physical and mental support, explained how he figured out their position.

At the time of their mishap the Old Hickory was sweeping around a great bend in the river. Years before, high water had cut a narrower channel for the surplus waters, which had been named "Catfish Cut-off." Though long since unused, and believed to have been permanently filled up, leaving only a sluggish bayou sort of slough, the recent flood had beyond a doubt reopened this cut-off. When they were hurled overboard the steamer must have been nearing this spot, and sheering obliquely across toward the other shore, where the safest channel lay. Thanks to this abrupt change of course, they escaped rising under the wheel; and thanks to it, since the heavy waves were hurled almost directly toward the mouth of Catfish Cut-off, the log to which they clung was driven out of the main current sufficiently far to fall into the influence of the waters rushing through this side chute.

It was this fact that kept them from floating

into the circle of light cast out by the fire-crates. This that explained why they did not float closer to the waiting steamer.

"I hadn't heard of the cut-off being opened again," added Top-Sawyer Sam, in conclusion. "It must have happened very recently, for they had no such information on board the Old Hickory. And that explains why they never thought to give a look our way."

Beyond a doubt this was the true explanation, but, aside from the courage lent by the cheering sound of that voice, it carried poor consolation to Farrington Mobbs. A more miserable mate one could hardly have selected for such a disagreeable adventure, and so Top-Sawyer Sam fully realized, long before the first gleam of day came to give them a view of their surroundings.

Still, he was a man who always tried to ignore the darker side of life, and honestly did all he could to brighten up his companion.

"Now we know just where we are, what is there to grumble about? It might be a little dryer traveling for comfort, but the storm is passing over, and the water isn't near so cold as I've known it. We're taking deck passage, to be sure, but then it don't cost us a cent, and when a man's getting a free ride, he's monstrous ungrateful for growling at the accommodations! Then—we'll charge every item up to those precious blacklegs! Charge—and discharge it belongs to them!" with a sudden viciousness in his voice that told how bitterly he felt toward their enemies just then.

"Think of that, Mobbsy! Doesn't it warm you clean through? Doesn't it send the blood leaping through your veins until you'd take oath you were sitting right atop a howling furnace?"

Farrington Mobbs moaned dissent, his yellow fangs chattering together as the cold chills increased at the thought of a fire.

"If I only get to land! Only save my life!" he moaned, feebly.

"You'd even give up your hopes of reaping a rich reward for telling the truth about old Tempest's will, eh?" laughed Top-Sawyer Sam.

Even in his utter wretchedness Farrington Mobbs gave a start at this speech, for he could not understand how Top-Sawyer Sam came to know so much. Surely he had not mentioned any names?

The River Rex laughed half-mockingly, reading his thoughts by the touch of his arm which was still about Mobbs's body.

"You let slip more than you intended, old fellow, when you were so bothered about Yellowhammer," he said, coolly. "And then, it may be that my memory was freshened a bit. I've spent much of my time in St. Louis, you know, and have met old Tempest more times than one. I remember there was some little gossip about his will, when he died, but it made scant impression on my brain. Now—since I'm in this hobble purely through trying to lead you a helping hand, don't you reckon it's time to give me a fairer idea of the game we're trying to play?"

Mobbs mumbled something, but his words were lost to even the keen ears of his companion. Top-Sawyer Sam laughed softly, and seemed content to let the matter drop for the time being.

"After all, I'd rather talk about getting square with those two rascals; and Yellowhammer Jones! I couldn't take oath that it was his gentle fist that sent me over to inspect the fishes, but I'm bound to have a square look into those blue eyes of his, to settle my doubts!"

"If we ever escape with life!" moaned the wretched Mobbs.

"If, be—suppose we say blessed?" laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, with a return of his old reckless humor. "We're bound to come through all right, if the whole bottom don't drop out of Catfish Cut-off!"

CHAPTER XX.

BOYD ASHBY PLAYS TO WIN.

COOLLY, calmly as though he had not just doomed a fellow-being to a fate worse than death itself, Boyd Ashby returned to the house, meeting Berthine Tempest with a cordial smile and warm clasp of the hand. Rapid progress, perhaps, but he was making the most of his position as cousin.

After the evening meal, he was called upon to repeat at more length the story of the fortune left behind by Theron Tempest, through which ordeal he passed to his complete satisfaction. This was not so difficult a task, after all, since he had but to tell the simple truth, save that he took care to repress the one all-important fact on which his hopes of success were mainly based.

If the absence of Uncle Zero was noticed at all, no hint of it came to the house that night, nor until well along in the forenoon of the succeeding day. Then there was a growing stir and bustle, for Mrs. Tempest asked after him, wishing to send a message to town, requesting the favor of a visit from Squire Nelson, a lawyer who attended to her legal business.

Word was brought that Uncle Zero was not to be found on the place, but even then little was thought of the matter, especially as Boyd

Ashby volunteered to carry the message, declaring that he was obliged to ride to town anyway, to look after his luggage, since his new-found relatives so warmly insisted on his remaining with them for a few days; at least until they could decide upon the best course to follow in the important matter of this will.

Boyd Ashby did ride to town, but not to deliver the message. Time was all-important to his hopes of success, and he returned with word that Squire Nelson was absent from town. He had not learned with certainty when he would be back, but had left word for him to lose no time in calling on his client when he should come back.

The day passed, and night came, without Uncle Zero turning up. The feeling of wonder rapidly changed to positive alarm, for the old negro was an important character on the place, and far too steady for even a suspicion of willful flight to be entertained.

Boyd Ashby hinted at this as a possible explanation for the vanishment, but even Berthine sharply corrected him, and he meekly bowed to her better knowledge of the old servant. Men and dogs were sent out in quest of the missing negro, only to return without favorable news. It almost seemed as though Uncle Zero had been translated; and more than one of the superstitious negro slaves, who had felt his impassioned power as an "exhorter," openly avowed their belief in this solution of the mystery.

As the days passed on without any tidings of Uncle Zero, Boyd Ashby ceased giving him a thought, bending all his powers toward one end: that of winning the heart and hand of his cousin, Berthine Tempest.

At first, this was but "casting an anchor to windward," as he himself laughingly admitted in his heart. If aught should arise to break in upon his original plans, it might be well to have another method of winning the game. And even in those first days, when nothing of love mingled with his schemings, he told himself that it would not be hard to get along with such a fair incumbrance as Berthine. Then, as the days passed and he learned to know her better, more intimately, Boyd Ashby found this last scheme rapidly gaining in interest. As far as lay in his coarse, animal nature he fell in love with the bright, arch, beautiful girl, until he felt that unless he could gain her hand in marriage, even in winning that great fortune he would still be the loser.

And Berthine! Despite her natural anxiety concerning the strange disappearance of Uncle Zero, she found those warm, clear, bracing days very pleasant indeed. Though eighteen years of age, she had never had a lover, in part owing to her mother, too weak to receive company herself, keeping her close at home. And Boyd Ashby, besides being handsome, fluent, and a cousin, had gallantly risked his life in her behalf when both were ignorant of the tie of blood existing between them.

That was a great card, and though he artfully concealed the fact, Boyd Ashby made it count for all it was worth in the game he was playing now.

At times he was almost confident that he had succeeded in winning the love of Berthine, though he had not as yet more than hinted at his passion for her, and of course had no positive means of knowing the exact state of her sentiments. But she enjoyed his company. She seemed never to tire of listening to his tales of the world in which she had thus far figured so slightly. She would sigh and blush at his touches of sentiment, until at length, less than one week from the period of their first meeting, the schemer felt almost assured that he had but to open his arms for the sweet prize to drop into them.

It was not all smooth sailing, however. He had to keep his wits well in play, not to let a chance slip from his grasp, and once, just before we take up the thread once more, he received a disagreeable shock in the voluntary appearance of an old, genteel-looking man, who was introduced to him as Squire Percy Nelson!

It required a wonderful exhibition of "cheek" and nerve to carry him through when Squire Nelson declared that he had not been absent from town a day for months past; but suspiciously as the old lawyer regarded him at first, Boyd Ashby proved equal to the occasion.

Not having the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with the lawyer, Ashby had trusted to the statement of a friend, who must have been mistaken, etc.

After a brief visit, during which it was agreed that immediate steps should be taken to look up the matter of the will, Squire Nelson took his departure, leaving Boyd Ashby determined to wait no more time than he possibly could help in securing his double prize.

It may be that Berthine, with eyes wonderfully sharpened during these past days, saw something of his purpose in his manner, for she provokingly avoided the little traps which he set for her all that day and throughout the next evening. True, she was aided in this by the condition of her mother, whose never strong nerves seemed no little shaken by the mystery still surrounding the fate of Uncle Zero, and the possibility of that wonderful will with

Squire Nelson. Berthine was absent from her side scarce a moment, and Boyd Ashby was forced to wait as best he might the coming of another day.

It may be that Berthine during the night had time to compose her mind and gather courage to face the inevitable; it is barely possible that she believed her cousin would not think of forcing a love scene in the early morning, but be this as it may, the forenoon was yet young when Ashby succeeded in intercepting her at a short distance from the house, and she shyly consented to join him in a stroll through the grove—the same where poor Uncle Zero had been so ruthlessly doomed to a miserable fate.

Now that he felt assured of a decision before a parting, Boyd Ashby was in no particular haste to learn his fate. He saw that Berthine was far from being composed, and he feared an abrupt avowal of his passion would frighten her into rejecting his suit. So, using all his arts to the one end, he slowly walked with his cousin through the woods, talking easily of ordinary matters, yet cunningly leading up to his real purpose.

"This is a glimpse of what seems almost heavenly delight, looking back over the lonely life I have led for so many years, dear cousin," he at length broke out, catching both her hands in his, stopping and turning until they stood face to face, hidden from the house by the intervening trees. "It almost maddens me when I am forced to think of leaving it—and you, my darling!"

Berthine uttered a low exclamation, almost of fright, as she shrunk from his ardent gaze—his peculiar eyes shining with a greenish fire in their luminous depths.

"Do I frighten you, my precious?" he murmured, one arm trying to steal about her shrinking figure. "Am I too abrupt in avowing the mad adoration with which your beauty and grace and womanly charms have inspired me? Yet you must have seen all this, Berthine! You must have divined my feelings—must have seen how wholly I was loving you, almost from the hour of our first meeting!"

"Hush!" she panted, striving to free her hand and waist from his ardent pressure. "I must not—you must—Look! Some one is coming!"

There was no pretense in her voice or face, and with a half-stifled curse Boyd Ashby turned his head to catch sight of the gaunt figure of the plantation overseer and manager, Jupiter Moxon, striding rapidly toward them, calling out in his rough, harsh voice:

"Beg pardon, Miss Berthine, but the madam sent me to ax you would you please hurry all you kin to the house."

The blushing maiden turned white as a sheet and ejaculated:

"There is nothing—mother is not ill, Mr. Moxon?"

"She ain't no wuss then usu'l, miss," was the prompt reply.

"I will accompany you, Berthine, and—" stopping short with an angry exclamation as Jupiter Moxon sturdily barred the way, saying: "The madam said Miss Berthine was to come alone, boss!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BLACK ABOVE THE WHITE.

THERE was something so peculiar in the voice and manner of the overseer—something that lent an impression of much more being held in reserve than was permitted to show on the surface—that Berthine Tempest was seriously alarmed; so much so that she turned and ran rapidly toward the house, neither hearing nor heeding what she left behind her.

Jupiter Moxon, tall, gaunt, loose-jointed, but withal a man whom a fair judge of human nature would far rather have for an ally than an antagonist, stepped fairly in front of Boyd Ashby as he spoke. His tone was calm, and as smooth as nature would permit, he not having been gifted in that line. His leathern countenance showed no alteration from its every-day manner, and his small gray eyes were cold and stone-like, just as Boyd Ashby had marked them at the time of their first meeting.

And yet, as he barred the way of the young man who took a hasty step after the agitated maiden, there seemed something under the placid surface that sent a thrill of angry doubt through the veins of the bold schemer. This might have been stronger, only for the fierce mortification which Boyd Ashby felt at having his love-scene cut short, and his victory delayed, just as he felt confident Berthine was on the point of yielding to him, her lord and master for a while.

"But that don't apply to me, of course, Moxon!" he sharply ejaculated, one hand shooting out as though to brush the gaunt overseer from the path.

Jupiter Moxon stood like a rock, his flat feet planted as though they had suddenly taken root. He caught the hand in one huge palm, giving it a squeeze that sent a half-shiver through the stout frame of its owner, then dropping the member as though he felt his duty performed.

"Orders is orders, Mr. Ashby," he said, coldly, his gaze more stony than ever as he encountered that fiery glance without flinching. "The

madam axed me would I tell Miss Berthine to hurry to her. She wanted to see her, alone. Alone means only one, es I take it. Ef you went 'long, Miss Berthine wouldn't be alone. Which is why I tuck the liberty o' steppin' in your path, Mr. Ashby."

Cold, methodical, sluggish; yet with an unexplainable difference in his manner which gave Boyd Ashby an ill-defined uneasiness.

"What is the matter with Aunt Tempest? She seemed even better than usual when we left her, but a few minutes since."

"Ef she's wuss, I don't know it. Ef they's anythin' out o' the common run the matter with her, the madam didn't let on to me. Why should she? My line o' duty runs outdoors. I knows that line, an' I follers that line from cend to cend, no matter what hes to git cut o' the way. Ef it was you that tried to block my wheels, in that line o' duty, sir, I reckon I'd run clean over you ef it broke every bone in the body o' us both."

Slowly, sluggishly, monotonous in tone and cadence, Jupiter Moxon spoke, his gray eyes stonier than stone itself, his lantern jaws steadily working on a mass of plug tobacco.

There was something in both voice and manner that sharply irritated Boyd Ashby, and for a brief space his hands closed tightly, his jaws grew a thought squarer and his eyes glittered green as those of a cat crouching in a dark ambush. Something urged him to leap at the throat of this imperturbable rascal, who seemed to be covertly mocking him.

That reckless impulse was but momentary, however. There was something in the gaunt figure, in that sphinx-like face and eyes that warned him of a tough customer, good man as he knew himself to be, physically speaking. He might come off second best; and then—what of the double game he was playing? How would he explain his actions to Berthine? For he knew that Jupiter Moxon was an authority on Randolph Place.

Forcing a laugh, he shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel. Only to wheel again with a curse as a heavy hand fell upon his arm.

"Nur yit I wouldn't go that way, Mr. Ashby," coldly uttered Jupiter Moxon, standing before the angry visitor with a countenance as expressionless as a blank wall. "Orders is orders, an' I've got mine."

"What the foul flend do you mean, you scoundrel?" grated Ashby, one hand slipping into his breast where nestled a brace of pistols. "How dare you drop the weight of a finger on my person? What are your orders to me? What excuse—"

"Orders, Mr. Ashby," in precisely the same tone of voice. "The madam said she wanted to see Miss Berthine alone. She said she mought take a notion fer to see you, after a bit. An' would I be ready to fetch you to her when that time come?"

Stronger than ever came the suspicion that something had turned up to endanger the perfect success of the bold game he was playing, and this time it would not down, though he strove to crush it under. He was a fool for even thinking of such a thing. What could possibly—

"You talk as though you owned the world, and I one of your lowest servants, you insolent scoundrel!" he gratingly exclaimed, flashing his green eyes into that leathern mask.

"Sorry if you don't like the way I talk, sir, but the madam gave me my orders, an' I'm in duty bound fer to kerry 'em out, break bones or split feelin's wide open. She said hev you ready on notice. When word comes, she wants you thar."

"I'll spare you the trouble of acting as escort!" snapped Ashby, as he started forward. "I'll go to your mistress and let her know what an insolent cur she is— Out of the way, curse you!"

With a long stride sideways Jupiter Moxon stood in his path.

"Orders, you know, sir," without the slightest alteration of voice or feature, though the hand of the angry man came out of his bosom with the butt of a pistol gripped tightly. "When the madam wants you she'll give a sign. Ef they ain't no sign, she don't want you. Sorry to 'pear like I was buckin' ag'in' you, sir, but—Waal, orders is orders."

If the overseer had shown anything like fear, or even anger at the hostile demonstration, Boyd Ashby would most certainly have called his weapon into play, either muzzle or butt, to have cleared the way. But the leather-face stood with his han's swinging listlessly at his side, simply barring the path with his bony frame, making no attempt to guard himself against attack, though he must have seen mischief in that passion flushed face and irritated eyes.

"Out of my path, you blunder-head!" grated Ashby, hoarsely. "Out of the way—or I'll chuck you out too quick!"

"You mean you'd try; but tryin' ain't doin', or orders wouldn't come so mighty tough at odd spells. I've knowed orders I liked heap better than the ones I'm kerryin' out right now, but—I reckon word is on the way from the madam now, Mr. Ashby!"

A swift glance showed Boyd a negro hasten-

ing toward them, with a face that was full of stupid wonderment. He knew that something had gone wrong with his plans, and a suspicion of the actual truth flashed across his brain for the first time. His first impulse was to break away, retreating if not actually fleeing, but he conquered the mad impulse almost as soon as he felt it.

"It's the word from madam, sure enough," added Jupiter Moxon, still in that dull, sluggish tone of his, as the negro made a gesture toward them, then turned and skurried away. "You'll come with me—"

"What if I prefer otherwise?" snapped Ashby, showing his teeth.

"My orders says fetch you to the madam. I don't know nothin' but orders. You'll go ef I hev to tote you on my back."

"I'll go—and so will you!" snarled Ashby, viciously striking down the bronzed hand that fell upon his arm. "I'll have you turned out, neck and crop, for your insolence to a gentleman and a guest! I'll see that you get orders to tramp, curse you for an insolent dog!"

"Ef the madam orders me to tramp, so be it. Jest now orders is to fetch you to the house, an'—"

"Follow at my heels, if you like, but dare to lay the weight of a finger on my person, and I'll scatter your brains over the county!" savagely growled Ashby, moving toward the building.

Jupiter Moxon made no reply in words. He seemed satisfied so long as his orders were in a fair way to be carried out. As for threats and epithets, they made no more impression on him than drops of summer rain make on a duck's back.

As he neared the house, Boyd Ashby composed his features as best he could, succeeding far better than might have been expected, considering all things. He saw that the negro servants were unusually active, hurrying to and fro, and he caught more than one startled look in his direction. He knew that something had gone wrong with his plans, and he nerved himself for a good fight.

As they reached the house, Jupiter Moxon swiftly gained his side, slipping an arm through his, with a light though firm grip that warned the young man he was fully on the alert, despite his manner of speech.

"You best put up that barker, I reckon, Mr. Ashby. The madam ain't sea'cely usen to sech tools, an' you mought set her nerves to jarrin' off anawar's. An' when she's narvous, she's monstrous apt to holler out words that'd make trouble—fer the one that skeered her, ye know!"

Without a word Boyd Ashby pushed the pistol out of sight, schooling his features as a door opened and he stood before—Uncle Zero!

Worn, haggard, bent, ragged; the very picture of misery despite the glow of angry triumph which shone in his eyes; but Uncle Zero, for all that!

The old negro stood beside the easy chair of his mistress, in whose cheeks blazed twin spots of vivid color. And as Boyd Ashby stepped into the room, Berthine glided to the side of Uncle Zero, taking one of his hands between her soft palms, facing her cousin with white face but indignant eyes.

At a glance the schemer saw that his vile conduct was fully revealed, but even then he did not flinch. His lips curled with a smile, and his voice was bland and gentle as he uttered:

"Did you send for me, Aunt Tempest? How can I serve you?"

"By explaining why you treated this poor old man with such awful barbarity, sir!" flashed the invalid, rising to a sitting posture. "By explaining why you sent him off, bound and gagged, to be sold down South without leave or license! By— Will you explain, sir?"

Boyd Ashby coolly stared at the face of the old servant, his lips slowly curling and a mocking light flashing into his greenish eyes.

"Where did you steal your whisky, Uncle Zero?"

The old man started forward, to be checked by Berthine, who cried:

"He is not drunk, and you cannot turn it off by a sneer or that sort, Boyd Ashby—if, indeed, your name is not a lie as well as your conduct since coming to us!"

"Hard words—and harder for coming from your sweet lips, Cousin Berthine!" muttered Ashby, his face flushing hotly, then turning a sickly white with strong emotion.

There was nothing counterfeit in this, at least. For a brief space he felt utterly wretched. Felt that he would sacrifice all else just to retain a shadow of her recent good-will.

"Hard words, you say?" flashed the maiden, her tones clear and full of burning indignation. "Harder than your conduct deserves?"

"With whaterimeam I charged?" the schemer managed to ask, crushing down his vain regrets, and fixing his mind on the great fortune for which he was playing such a bold game.

Berthine glanced up into Uncle Zero's face, her warm clasp leading him both strength and steadiness to tell his story, briefly but clearly and to the point. He exaggerated nothing, telling the simple facts up to the point where he saw him forced away by Hump Majors at the

keen point of a knife. Then he paused, more to quiet his emotions than for lack of breath or because he had no more misery to detail.

Through it all Boyd Ashby listened with an admirably forced smile on his face, and when Uncle Zero ceased speaking, he turned to Berthine:

"If you had not shown such strange credulity, Berthine, I would simply laugh at this idiotic rigmarole, setting it down as a silly excuse for a drunken absence. As it is, I flatly deny every item that connects me with the matter. I swear on honor that it is false in toto! Which will you choose to believe: a gentleman or that lying nigger?"

"Uncle Zero, a thousand times over!" flashed Berthine, earnestly.

CHAPTER XXII.

DEFEATED AT ALL POINTS.

FOR a brief space there was silence profound. Then it was broken by the cold, monotonous voice of Jupiter Moxon:

"Shall I hitch him up, madam, fer takin' to town on a charge of nigger-stealin'?"

Boyd Ashby gave a vicious growl, and thrust a hand into his breast in quest of a weapon, but before he could do more, the overseer had him in an iron grip, twisting his hands away from his bosom where lay his weapons, swinging him from his feet as though he was nothing more than a feeble child, bearing him from the room and tumbling him down the veranda steps with far more speed than grace or comfort.

Fairly beside himself, Boyd Ashby scrambled to his feet, brushing the dust from his eyes and flashing forth a pistol as he poured forth mad curses on his assailant.

"I'll kill you for this, you—"

"Boance him, boys!" cried Jupiter Moxon, catching up a fowling-piece that stood in the niche beside the front door, then striding down the steps to where Boyd Ashby was struggling furiously in the united grasp of several negroes.

The overseer deftly removed all weapons, then made his men a sign to set his captive free again. Instantly the order was obeyed, and his cold tones rung out harshly, meaningly:

"You kin kick, Mr. Ashby, ef that name ain't stole like the rest. You kin rip an' charge, but it ain't gwine to hurt nobody wuss then your own self. It's a mighty black charge ag'in' a man; nigger-stealin' is!"

Like magic the unmasked schemer calmed down; though there was little or nothing of physical fear to be seen in his face or distinguished in his voice as he spoke:

"You lie when you hint that I ever tried to steal, nigger or name. You lie in actions by backing up the ridiculous tale that crazy nigger has imposed upon the ladies. They lie—"

"One word more like that an' off goes your head!" sharply cried Moxon, lifting his gun, his face flushed, his eyes glowing as though backed by living flames.

Boyd Ashby laughed, sarcastically, but never flinched from the gun that bore full upon his mocking face.

"The ladies lie—under a mistake which they will bitterly regret before the passage of many days more," he finished, coolly.

"You won't be in a fix to hear 'em admit that much, ef you keep on waggin' that tongue so mighty keardless," retorted Moxon, once more his cold, imperturbable self as he lowered his weapon. "Orders is orders, an' I've got mine. Only fer them, I'd truss ye up hand an' heels, an' jug ye on the charge o' nigger-stealin'. Es it is, you kin travel. The boys hev got your critter out yender," with a nod toward the distant gate. "It's ag'in' my judgment, an' ag'in' my wishes, this lettin' of a nigger-thief go loose, but them's the orders the madam give me when she sent me to call the young mistress."

"Did she order you to dig your grave with your own tongue?" sneered Ashby, showing his teeth in a vicious smile as he brushed the dust from his garments. "I've got a mighty good memory of my own. I've put down each ugly word you've uttered, and even if you stop short right now, the sum total is more than enough to fit you for a winding-sheet!"

"I kin be found at my post o' duty 'most any day, Mr. Ashby," was the cold reply. "I kinder wish you'd find time an' grit to call 'round my way. It's ag'in' my will to say anythin' that kin sarve to keep you out o' range, but orders is orders, an' I've got mine."

"The madam said I was to tell you to leave, an' stay away. Ef you ever showed your face in these parts ag'in, I was to hitch onto you, ef it tuck every slave an' houn' on the place. I was to take you to town, an' enter oath ag'in' you as a nigger-stealer."

"Anything more?" sneered Ashby, forcing a smile that was fairly ghastly in its sham mirth.

"Only to see that you git. I'm ready to help ye ef ye cain't—"

He was, only too ready, as a glance assured Ashby. And so were the grinning negroes who hung around like a swarm of bees, far too many for an unarmed man to even think of defying. It was a bitter pill, but he was no fool, and made the best of a bad bargain.

"Tell the ladies that I can easily be found at Vicksburg. Say that when they discover the mistake they have made, when they flog Uncle Zero and discharge you for insulting a gentleman, they can send me an apology to my hotel!"

Without pausing for a reply, the unmasked schemer turned on his heel and strode away to where his horse was hitched to the big gate.

He unfastened him, leaped into the saddle and rode swiftly away, never once casting a glance backward at the scene of his discomfiture.

Venomous curses and wildest imprecations fairly frothed through his grinding teeth as he dashed along the road leading to town. With the passage of each minute he more bitterly realized his defeat. Not that he felt his game for gold lost, or even seriously imperiled; he had kept too close guard over the one all-important condition which marked the will of Theron Tempest for that; but he knew that he had forever lost all chance of winning the love and hand in marriage of the real heiress.

A sharp exclamation broke in upon his mad ride and caused him to wrench up his foaming steed just as he shot past a horseman, barely escaping a collision that might have proved fatal to one or both.

"You, Boyd Ashby!" cried the other, wheeling his horse and riding up with outstretched hand. "Put it there, man! I was just hunting you up to— What in sin has gone crooked with you, anyway?"

"Yellowhammer!" ejaculated Ashby, looking like one who could hardly believe the evidence of his own senses. "Where'd you drop from?"

"St. Louis. Had the liveliest time you ever dreamt of, too!" with a harsh, forced laugh, adding: "You were heading for town; shall we ride that way? I've got a heap to tell you, old fellow."

"No fresh trouble?" scowled Ashby. "Surely you haven't let that walking skeleton get away with you?"

"He's all right now, though he gave me more trouble than I expected when I dropped you that note of warning from St. Louis. I only stopped long enough to knock the fellow in the head—fitting him for a free ride to the bone-yard, as I could have taken oath! Then I set out to help you at this end, but— Well, it's too long a story to tell in full, just now. I got into a row on board, had to knife a couple of squealers, was marooned on a towhead for reward; barely escaped being drowned by the river changing its channel and eating up the bar!"

Still, after the same terse fashion, Yellowhammer Jones told of his rescue by Top-Sawyer Sam, and of all that followed on board the Old Hickory.

"You might have knocked me over with a straw when I saw old Mobbs, as big as life and twice as natural; but I saved him elegantly!"

He told of the vain search that night of storm, and how he and his tools escaped more than a passing suspicion of being concerned in the crime—accident, as the affair was finally conceded to be.

"They'll never bother our little game, be sure of that," with a heartless laugh, cut short by a glance into the hard, scowling face of his fellow-rascal. "But you—how fares it?"

It was an unpleasant tale to recite, but Ashby made no effort to gloss it over, revealing everything, even to the manner of his ejection from Randolph Place by Jupiter Moxon.

"The game is played out in this quarter, and though it bites me monstrous deep, I'll never squeal over it!" he frowned, in conclusion.

"I don't like that about the lawyer," thoughtfully muttered Yellowhammer Jones. "There's time enough for them to win the game, if they set to work at once! Is he a stir-about fellow, think?"

"He's lazy enough, no doubt, but I fancied he was just a little too fond of ogling the widow," replied Ashby.

"Worse and worse, and more of it! If he's plans in that direction, he'll be apt to keep stirring, if only to help along his own ends. Well, we hold the ace, and if we can't bluff our way through with that advantage, we deserve to lose the pot!"

"Lose?" grated Ashby, with a vicious curl of his lips and a mad gleam in his green eyes. "I'll win if I have to wade through blood up to my very lips!"

They rode on to town, for the most part in silence, each one having too much food for thought to spare breath in idle speech. They left their animals at the stable where Yellowhammer Jones hired his mount, and passed along toward the hotel at which Ashby proposed to stop for the present.

This led them in the direction of the river, and as a steamer gave a whistle for landing, they turned in that direction, soon gaining the freight-laden wharf, just as the boat made fast. And an instant later Yellowhammer Jones caught the eye of his comrade, a choking cry escaping his lips as he shrunk closer behind a pile of cotton-bales:

"Father of Satan! look yonder!" pointing at two men just landing.

One was Top-Sawyer Sam, and his companion was Farrington Mobbs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC ALLY.

"How now, my inveterate croaker?" cheerily laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, as the two men felt the firm earth beneath their feet again after all their trials and tribulations. "Won't you admit that I'm at least the son of a prophet? Yonder's the 'Old Hickory,' still in sight, even if she has left the wharf before we caught up!"

Farrington Mobbs made no reply in words, shivering a little as he glanced after the steamboat puffing down the swift current, then looking around them as though more than half expecting some of his enemies to start up from the ground, dragon-tooth-like.

He looked some better than when we last saw him, though he bore in face and bent figure traces of the suffering, bodily and mental, to which he had been subjected.

Top-Sawyer Sam, on the contrary, never looked brighter, gayer, more entirely free from care than at that moment. And yet, as the two evil schemers cautiously watched them, they fancied there was a stern decision to be seen in both his face and his movements.

Little suspecting what eyes were upon them, the two men hurried away from the wharf, crowded and bustling with teams and footmen.

"We've held our own tolerably well, this far, Mobbsy, and now it's to be seen how well we can keep up the lick on the home stretch. Unless you've been lying to yours truly, there isn't very much time to cut to waste if we're to go under the wire within the time limit!"

"I've not lied—what makes you think that?" snapped Farrington Mobbs, with a terrierish glance sideways into the face of Top-Sawyer Sam as he was hurried along by that muscular arm.

"I don't think it, Mobbsy. If I did, would I have taken all this trouble? Would I have cheated the catfish out of their picking—slim enough that would be, too!" with a short, mellow laugh.

He had drawn the hand of the lawyer's clerk through his arm, hugging it closely as though he feared Farrington Mobbs might try to give him the slip now that all danger seemed past. He was striding along the street at a rare pace, making the old man puff and wheeze as he was forced to keep up. Now and again he would give a bluff nod or a quick smile in return for like salutations from men whom they met or passed.

"What?" he ejaculated, suddenly slackening his pace as Mobbs gave a panting cry of wretchedness, literally hanging upon his arm. "Not winded already? A bit of bone and gristle like you!"

The lawyer's clerk reeled against a dead wall, panting, perspiring at every pore, the picture of limp exhaustion.

"I was a brute for hauling you along at such a pace, come to look it over in that light," nodded Top-Sawyer Sam, kindly, in tone and glance. "I really did not stop to think. Catch your breath, and I'll tell you where and what for we're going."

"If you go slower—I can keep on," panted Mobbs, bracing up.

"Better yet," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, lending the old man an arm as a support rather than as a manacle. "There's little time to cut to waste, unless we want to see those rascally schemers win the game."

"You're going—"

"To look up a lawyer, smart as they grow in these parts, Mobbsy. We'll find him, and ten to one he'll know all about this young lady. You will brace up and tell him all you've told me, and—"

"He'll cheat me out of all reward!" gloomily interjected Mobbs, with a groan of misery and disgust. "He'll gobble up every penny, and tell me to go to the Old Boy for my pains!"

Top-Sawyer Sam laughed heartily at the manner in which this prediction was made, but hastened to reassure his companion.

"You'd ought to know lawyers, by this time, but my man is of a different grade from the sort you've herded with, I reckon. He's white from top to toe, and honest as he is frank and generous—God bless him say I!"

"And you'll— you'll stand up for my rights, Mr. Cary?" whined Farrington Mobbs, plucking up his courage a little at this enthusiastic indorsement.

"I'll see you have something to jingle in your pockets, old man; as for getting your deserts—I wouldn't insist on that point too hard, were I tilting your shoes!"

There was a touch of scorn mingled with the grin just that served to put a check on the tongue of the lawyer's clerk, and he kept silence until Top-Sawyer Sam paused on the second floor of a business house, rapping sharply at a door which bore the name of Judge P. Nelson.

"You think it best to tell him everything?" he mumbled, uneasily, biting the last word off short as a natty little clerk answered the knock, bidding them enter.

With a hand closed around the wrist of his shrinking companion, Top-Sawyer Sam crossed the room and swung open a door opposite with-

out troubling the clerk to ask his business. And then, in a cheery tone he addressed the portly, white-haired gentleman who looked up at their unceremonious entrance:

"Too big a hurry to stop for ceremony, squire, so don't order me back to knock as a gentleman should announce himself!"

"You—Cary?"

"And friend, Farrington Mobbs—Squire Nelson," with a twist of the wrist bringing the lawyer's clerk more into sight, despite his evident reluctance.

"I am charmed to see you, Sam—and your friend," with a formal bow as he gazed at the cringing figure over the top of his gold-bowed glasses. "You are still the same wild, harum-scarum, tempest sort of a boy, I see!" with a smile broadening on his ruddy face.

"And speaking of tempest—do you happen to know anything about a young lady called Miss Berthine Tempest, squire?"

"Do I?" echoed the lawyer, plainly taken aback by this brisk assault. "What do you want to know about Miss Tempest?"

"I see you know the lady," nodded Top Sawyer Sam, pitching his hat on a table and dropping down in a chair, nodding to Farrington Mobbs to imitate his example. "Now we'll get at matters from the top, and make a clean deal as we go along."

"Does this Berthine Tempest live in town, or out in the country?"

Squire Nelson resumed his chair, but seemed ill at ease. Though it was clear enough to be seen that he knew Top-Sawyer Sam well and liked him even better, it was still more palpable that he did not like the turn affairs were taking just then. The River Rex saw as much, and instantly his manner altered; he grew grave and earnest as he added:

"I ask, not through idle curiosity or any other unworthy motive, dear sir. This gentleman has a curious story to tell about a will—"

"Theron Tempest's will?" ejaculated the squire.

Farrington Mobbs tried hard to stifle a groan of intense disgust, but only succeeded in drawing those bright, eager eyes toward himself.

"You've heard of it, then?" asked Top-Sawyer Sam. "May I ask by what means the tidings reached your ears?"

"Through a gentleman; one Boyd Ashby, nephew to Mrs. Tempest, and consequently the cousin of the young lady whose name you have spoken," just a little stiffly responded the lawyer.

Again a curious sound came from where the lawyer's clerk sat, but this time it was a rasping gasp of intense relief. Yet it sounded so queerly that Squire Nelson again started nervously in his seat.

"Is the—ah—your friend sick, Cary?" he uttered, eying Farrington Mobbs over his glasses, with a curious expression of mingled wonder, doubt, uneasiness and disgust.

"Never mind him, squire; it's only a way he has when anything shakes him up from the center. Boyd Ashby, you say?"

Squire Nelson bowed, cautiously drawing a heavy gold-headed cane closer to hand with a furtive glance toward the lawyer's clerk.

"If the—your friend would step around the corner, Cary, he'd find a doctor to— Keep your distance, you rascal!" leaping to his feet, cane uplifted as Mobbs hopped from his chair, unable longer to restrain his avaricious anxiety.

Laughingly Top-Sawyer Sam interposed, and with a few words succeeded in setting the mind of his old friend at ease.

"He's gone through a good deal of late, you know," hurriedly giving a brief synopsis of their adventures on the way down the river.

"But I fail to see—it all looks black to my eyes!" declared Squire Nelson, rumpling his snowy locks as he polished the top of his pate with a plump palm.

"Simply because this Boyd Ashby kept back the one important condition attached to the bequest. Mobbs can tell you just what I mean. I brought him here for this very purpose."

Reluctantly, as though even now he disliked to give up the important secret to which he had clung so long in hopes of eventually making a bargain advantageous to his own pocket, Farrington Mobbs complied.

As far as he went, Boyd Ashby had told a straight story about the will left behind by Theron Tempest. But the all-important condition attached thereto he had carefully kept dark.

By the terms of that will, every dollar of which Theron Tempest died possessed was left to his brother Noble, or, failing him, his heir or heirs, provided he had married and left children behind him. But it was expressly stated that Noble Tempest or his children must come forward and prove their claims within the space of two calendar years after the death of the testator. If neither he nor his children should put in a claim before midnight of the last day of grace, the entire property was to revert to his sister, Drusilla and her legal heirs, to whom would be claimed one year more of grace. Then, if no claimants were found, the property was to be devoted to charitable institutions.

With glowing eyes and open mouth Squire

Nelson listened to this revelation, squirming uneasily on his seat as Farrington Mobbs progressed, breaking out into a wild series of wilder ejaculations as the lawyer's clerk came to an end.

"The infernal scoundrel! The double-faced villain! That's why he couldn't find me the other—that's why he—I'll horsewhip him until his hide flutters in ribbons! I'll—I'll—good Lord!"

"You know where he is, then, squire?" interposed Top-Sawyer Sam.

"Out at Randolph Place, confound his infernal impudence!" puffed Nelson, whacking his cane across the desk until the room filled with the sound, and the natty little clerk flung wide the door, alarm in every feature of his countenance. "Go order three horses, sir! At once! Have them brought to the door! And bring a dozen policemen to—"

"Bring the horses, my good lad, and leave the policemen to me," Top-Sawyer Sam amended, with a light laugh.

The clerk darted away without stopping to snatch up his hat, and Top-Sawyer Sam, in a tone that unconsciously calmed down the lawyer, spoke rapidly and to the point:

"Theron Tempest died on April 3d. There still remain eleven days of grace. Not so much leeway as I would like, but plenty for our purpose, I reckon. We can count on you to join us in freezing this sweet Cousin Boyd Ashby out of the game, squire?"

"Count on me? Why, sir, I'll defeat the infernal scoundrel—I'll cover him with shame and disgrace if it costs me every dollar I'm worth in this wide world. Count on me, indeed! Dare to even hint at such a doubt or ask such a question again, sir, and I'll—I'll—"

"That's hearty," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam with a hearty grip that made the old gentleman wince despite his intense excitement. "We'll call the turn on Boyd Ashby, dead sure."

"I'll have him flogged by niggers up and down every street in the city, sir! I'll have him tarred and feathered! I'll—"

"You'll leave the gentleman to me, instead," with sudden coldness. "I have a little score to settle with him, and not even an old and true friend like you, squire, can step between. Do you agree to this? If not—then our paths run in different directions from now on."

Squire Nelson hesitated a little, but before the horses came to the door, he cooled down sufficiently to yield with a fair grace. After all, Top-Sawyer Sam was the right man to deal with the audacious rascal.

The three men descended to where the saddle-horses were waiting, and mounting, rode rapidly out of town, heading for Randolph Place.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RALLYING THEIR FORCES.

FROM their covert of cotton bales, Boyd Ashby and Yellowhammer Jones watched the landing of the two men whom, until that moment, they firmly believed to be food for fishes. Following at a distance, they saw Top-Sawyer Sam lead the way into a business building in which Boyd Ashby knew Judge Nelson had his office.

"Curse the hound!" he grated, viciously, as he made this discovery. "How much does he know? What sends him there?"

Yellowhammer Jones made no response. He was too utterly stunned by this discovery—it seemed like a veritable resurrection of the dead! How had Top-Sawyer Sam escaped drowning? And Farrington Mobbs: he was hurled into the swift river, bound and gagged—utterly helpless to even fight for his life!

"You're sure—you don't reckon it's a ghost?" he muttered, shivering violently, his face turning a sickly yellow.

Boyd Ashby gave a vicious snarl as he flashed a greenish glare into the face of the temporarily unmanned sport, but made no answer in words. He feared to trust himself so far, just then. It was all he could do to refrain from driving his knife hilt deep into the heart of the fellow who had so miserably failed in all respects.

For the moment he forgot his own blunders. He only remembered that but for this unexpected complication his schemes, as originally outlined, could hardly fail of success. But now—

"If Farrington Mobbs tells the whole truth, we're dished!"

Skulking in a hallway, the two men watched the clerk issue forth in quest of horses. Watched his return with the animals, and ground their teeth in savage impotence as they realized the meaning of this.

"If we could cut them off and drop them from cover before they reached the plantation!" grated Ashby, venomously.

Yellowhammer Jones made no response, even then. And knowing how absurd was his own mad suggestion, Boyd Ashby said no more.

Together they watched the three men descend and take saddle. Together they followed them far enough to make sure they were leaving town by the road which would carry them to the home of the Tempests.

"That settles it, Jones!" uttered Boyd Ashby, with forced composure, as he dropped his

espial. "They've gone to carry the news I kept under cover. They'll come back, and have her with them!"

With an effort Yellowhammer Jones shook his scattered wits together, and soon seemed more like his usual self, though still pale and with a wild, hunted expression about his lips and in his eyes.

"There's a chance yet," he moodily muttered, as they left a saloon where each drank thirstily. "They may not catch a boat for days, yet!"

"And they may catch one before morning!" scowled Ashby.

"It's a mighty black lookout—monstrous black! I can't see through it, even yet! How they escaped the river—Why, man alive!" with vicious emphasis as their eyes met. "The boys tied Mobbs hand and foot and dropped him right under the wheel! I felt that devil's head give as I struck him! He never made a motion—never gave a single yelp as he dropped head-first into the river, directly in the track where the paddles must pass!"

"All the same, they *did* get out—and I reckon you and I had better get out, too!" with a short, disagreeable laugh. "Old Nelson will be just boiling over, and what with him and that infernal Cary, Vicksburg will be mighty unhealthy for two men of our size before long!"

"What can we do? Surely you'll not drop the game now?"

"Drop it, you say?" showing his teeth in a devilish smile. "I'll come out winner if I have to wade through blood up to my chin, I tell you, man! It's more than money with me now; ten thousand times more than money! I'm going to win, with or without your help!"

"I'm in the game still, of course. Just now I'm a bit off my base, thanks to that sight—curse them both! It makes me shiver, even yet! I can't fully believe they are really alive, I can't help thinking of them as dead men—as ghosts, if you will have it so!"

Boyd Ashby gazed into the hard-set countenance of his partner in crime with growing wonder in his eyes. Never before had he seen his steel-like nerves so completely shattered.

"I only wish they were no more substantial than ghosts!" he laughed, slipping a hand through the quivering arm of the gambler, and leading him into his hotel, hurrying at once to his chamber.

"Now this is the programme, as far as I've lined it out," he said, while busily packing the few things which he had left there when he settled down at Randolph Place. "We can't stop in town. Old Nelson—to say nothing of Top-Sawyer Sam—will rake the place over for me, and I'm not in the humor for being lynched, just at present."

"We'll see if there's a boat ready to pull out for down river. If there is, we'll watch our chance to slip aboard without making a particular show of ourselves. We'll go down river to the next landing, and leave the boat there, to keep an eye out for the next steamer up-bound. We'll board *that* boat, and manage to see each passenger who comes on her at this place. If our friends are among the number, we'll see if we can't make the excursion a lively one for them. If not, we'll try the same game over again."

Yellowhammer Jones made no suggestion to this, either in amendment or confirmation. Though he was slowly regaining his scattered wits, he was far from being his wonted self. In time, perhaps; but it would be no easy task, as he was forced to admit in his whirling brain.

Boyd Ashby, smothering his impatience as best he could, urged him to drink from his pocket-flask, keeping him company with a good will.

"You've got to clear that face of yours, my fine fellow, else everybody we meet'll swear you've got a touch of Yellow Jack, sure!" he muttered, as he completed his preparations.

"I'll be all right. I'm coming around again, as it is. I can't account for my tumbling all in a heap like this, unless—Ashby," with a husky voice, and a trembling hand grasping the arm of his comrade. "You can't imagine all that I've endured since the hour I knocked Sam Cary overboard! There hasn't been an hour since that I haven't had to fight like a demon to drive away his face—the face I saw as he urged his men on to save me from drowning! I haven't had an hour's sound sleep since then—and when I saw him yonder, I couldn't believe other than that it was his spirit come back to haunt me to death for taking the life of one who gave life back to me!"

"You're silly, mate," laughed Boyd Ashby, trying the best he knew how to draw his partner in crime from this morbid condition.

With the aid of brandy he partially succeeded, and paying off his score at the bar, they left the hotel.

"If a boat don't leave within an hour we'll steal or buy a skiff for the trip," said Ashby, fully realizing the peril which would surely menace them should their enemies return to find them still in Vicksburg.

Fortunately for their plans, as well as comfort of mind, they were just in time to spring aboard a down-bound boat. The gang-plank

was already being drawn in as they reached the wharf, but the risk was nothing in comparison to that which they would thus escape, and they safely reached the deck as the boat swung slowly away from its moorings.

Courting as little attention as might be, the two schemers from a point on the guards keenly watched the wharf as long as their eyes could distinguish face or figure. Boyd Ashby drew a long breath of relief as he muttered:

"No signs of them, so far. Not that I expected to see them, but it is best to be on the safe side. Unless some of our acquaintances saw us get aboard, even Top-Sawyer Sam will hardly be smart enough to drop to our little game when he fails to find us in town. If he thinks of a boat, he'll be just as apt to think we've run down to Orleans, giving the game up as lost."

"Then you still have hopes?" muttered Yellowhammer Jones.

"Strong as ever—why not?" with a scowl of impatience.

"Nothing—only it looks mighty dubious to me."

"If you had done your work in anything like a shipshape manner there wouldn't be anything dubious about it!" with a sulky rage in his voice which he could not entirely smother, though he quickly sought to soften the speech. "But let that pass. You did slip up on it, and now we've got to bunch the cards for a final deal. If we can't put up a winning hand between us, I reckon we deserve to lose the pot!"

"I'll do the best I know how, but you must give me a little time to catch my breath," gravely responded Yellowhammer Jones.

"There's time enough—I wish there was less!" with a black scowl. "Eleven days, yet. Only to reach St. Louis. Time enough to make the round trip, instead of only one way."

"A boat may not come for days, though that's a mighty slim hope at this season. If it should come, and they board her, what then?"

A deadly glow came into the tigerish eyes, and Ashby hissed through his grating teeth with deadly emphasis:

"She'll be with them. Her mother's too feeble to take the trip. If I can't win by other means, I'll kill her before their very eyes! Ay! even though it costs my life the next instant, I'll do it!"

CHAPTER XXV.

CARRYING THE NEWS.

DESPITE his portliness, his white hairs and other signs of increasing years, Squire Nelson required no urging along the way. Born and bred in the South, with blood as good as the best, it goes without saying that he was familiar with the saddle. Top-Sawyer Sam himself was no more active or at home on horseback, and as for Farrington Mobbs—his cup of misery seemed full to overflowing.

He had not only parted with his precious secret—gained at the cost of so much sneaking and prying, spying and eavesdropping—without even a scratch from a pen to show for the reward he had counted on reaping in consequence, but now he was being jounced and jolted at headlong speed until his flesh turned to jelly and his bones rattled in their articulations—for what?

"To be murdered like a sheep-killing cur!" he inwardly moaned, his parchment-like skin growing damp with the dews of torture, quite as much mental as physical. "To be shot down or sliced up by that monstrous villain and fire-eater, Boyd Ashby! To lose my life—to lose my prize—Satan blot out the hour in which I first struck the scent of this wretched plot of theirs!"

Now and then, as he clung desperately to the horn of his saddle, Farrington Mobbs would jerk out disconnected appeals for a moderated pace, only to have them unnoticed or else turned to ridicule. Squire Nelson was far too greatly excited by the story he had heard to think of drawing rein for a trifle of discomfort on the part of another.

"You can slacken steam, Mobbsy, if you can't stand the racket," Top-Sawyer Sam laughed over a shoulder. "Follow your nose and the road and you'll catch up in the course of a day or two. Unless Boyd Ashby or Yellowhammer Jones should happen to freeze onto you, I don't say there's any certainty of this, but—well, that's *your* lookout."

The hint was sufficient, and though poor Mobbs really suffered tortures indescribable during that headlong trip, he clinched his teeth and endured it as best he might. Even a death by jolting on the upper deck of a rough traveling trotter was far preferable to falling into the power of either Boyd Ashby or Yellowhammer Jones.

Little attention was paid him by the two men who dashed along in front. Not that they were naturally hard-hearted or inconsiderate, even; it is difficult for an expert rider to realize the sad predicament in which a wretched horseman finds himself when forced to journey beyond his slow limit. And, too, Farrington Mobbs was hardly a character to keep strong sympathy awake in honest men's hearts.

Riding side by side, Top-Sawyer Sam and Squire Nelson talked with ease as they rapidly

covered the miles lying between Vicksburg and Randolph Place. As a matter of course their talk was confined to the story of the will and the bold game which Boyd Ashby had undertaken to play toward the real heiress.

"That is what troubles me the most to comprehend," frowned the lawyer, impatiently. "I can understand why he should plot to put that fellow out of the way," with a slight backward toss of his snow-fringed head to indicate his meaning without using names. "But why not content himself with doing that? Why not devote his own time and talents to that one end, to make doubly sure? That's the puzzle—and to save my reputation I can't see through the muddle!"

A peculiar light flashed into the gray eyes of the River King as he asked:

"This young lady, squire: she is from fair to good-looking?"

"Why, you impudent—she's an angel, sir!" exploded the lawyer, abruptly changing his speech as he caught that half-roguish smile. "I'll tell Berthine to answer that question herself when I introduce you—you graceless, irreverent wretch!"

"That would be a waste of breath on both sides, my dear sir," was the cool retort. "I'll back my eyes against her tongue for true judgment in the line of feminine grace and beauty. But let that card lie."

"They say this fortune left behind by Theron Tempest will cut up pretty close to seven figures. Enough to make a good fight for, you see. Small blame, then, from his standpoint, if this young Ashby should play every card that he thought could help along his score."

"Mobbsy was caught in the act, and though he gave them the slip for the moment, they knew he had plenty of time to post a letter to the rightful heiress, telling all he had discovered. This he didn't do, but how were they to make sure of that? So Yellowhammer Jones sent a warning signal to Ashby, letting him know what fresh complications might arise, and while he undertook to put Mobbsy out of the game, his partner looked to the chances at this end of the line. See?"

"All this I'd studied out for myself, but it still leaves the affair but little better than a muddle!" frowned the lawyer, in response. "Why didn't Ashby wait to see if any such letter was delivered? Even if he couldn't have intercepted this, he was smart enough to read the signs aright; he could hardly have mistaken the excitement, the hasty movements which would surely have followed any such announcement."

"Maybe that was his original line. Maybe while watching for this excitement, etc., he chanced to catch a fair glimpse of this fairer lady—not only an heiress but a cousin as well! And so seeing her, what was more natural than for him to think of making assurance doubly sure; of capturing the heiress as well as the fortune?"

"The infernal scoundrel!" exploded the lawyer, almost bursting with hot indignation as the truth seemed to flash upon his mind.

"Well, I hardly reckon this Boyd Ashby would serve to fill a niche among saints, just as he stands," softly laughed the River Rex.

"And to think that I left the monstrous rascal there—left him in honey and clover up to the very ears! Why, he may even have dared to—to make love to Berthine, the audacious scoundrel!"

"Fool if he hasn't, and from all accounts he's more knave than idiot," laughed Sam, taking a malicious pleasure in "working up" the choleric old gentleman.

"There's the entrance to Randolph Place!" with a nod at the great gates which led from the main road into the shaded driveway. "Thank the Lord I'll soon have that scheming villain under my thumb and—"

"Remember that he is *my* meat, squire," interposed Top-Sawyer Sam, with sudden gravity that once more impressed the lawyer. "You look after the ladies, and leave Boyd Ashby to me."

Squire Nelson made no reply, other than a glance and a nod, for they both saw the tall figure of Jupiter Moxon striding toward them.

"All well at the house, my good fellow?" called out Nelson.

"All well as could be expected, I reckon, square. Friends o' yours, o' course!" with a keen glance into the faces of the lawyer's companions, lingering longest on that of the River Rex.

"For whom I am not responsible, sir!" with a sudden frown as he swung his portly figure from the saddle to the ground. "Call a nigger to take care of our cattle, will you?"

"Mebbe I'll do as well, square," stonily responded the overseer, running a long arm through the reins as the trio dismounted—Farrington Mobbs with many a groan and gasp of pain, not unmingled with relief.

Now that the time was so near at hand, even Top Sawyer Sam seemed a trifle reluctant about entering the house to confront the ladies. At any other time Squire Nelson might have wondered at this, for the River Rex was not wont to display the bashful flag, but just now he was

too eager to confront the vile schemer and bring him to shame.

"Come along with you!" grasping an arm of each and hurrying them up the veranda steps. "We'll corner the scoundrel before he's time to even suspect what's in the wind. We'll—Ha! Miss Berthine!"

They were met at the door by the maiden, who seemed strangely agitated. Top-Sawyer Sam noticed this, and at once suspected something of the truth. Of course he had no means of even guessing how it had all come about, but he felt almost certain that there had been an explosion of some nature between Boyd Ashby and the ones he was plotting against.

"Your mother—she is well? Well enough to see us for a few minutes, Berthine?" hastily asked the lawyer, forgetting even to introduce his companions, so great was his excitement. She must see us! We bring great news—wonderful tidings."

Startled, bewildered, Berthine gave way before him, and Squire Nelson made his way into the room where Mrs. Tempest was reclining upon her invalid chair, looking pale and worn after that agitating scene in which Boyd Ashby had played so base a part.

The sight of that white, thin, yet still beautiful face, seemed to recall Squire Nelson to himself, and he introduced both Cary and Mobbs to the ladies in due form. And strongly impressed though he was with the beauty and grace of the daughter, Top-Sawyer Sam was cool enough to surmise a secret which existed between the mother and her lawyer.

"No wonder the old gentleman was so eager to take a hand in the game!" he mentally recorded. "He's mighty hard hit; and holds a fistful of trumps, too!"

"It is cruel to trouble you with business matters, my dear madam," murmured the lawyer, bowing with an air of courtly devotion over the white hand of the invalid. "But needs must when—Boyd Ashby; is he anywhere within call?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SAM GROWS EARNEST.

MRS. TEMPEST shivered, casting an appealing glance at Berthine, who lost no time in coming to the rescue.

"Mr. Ashby has left the Place, never to return, as we sincerely trust and hope, dear sir," she said, her voice a little unsteady, her face turning a thought paler as she recalled her narrow escape—more narrow than any one would ever know from her lips!

And then, mother and daughter taking turns, as it were, the whole black story was told, the three men listening with vastly differing demeanor.

The choleric lawyer kept shifting on his chair as though it was growing red-hot, breaking out into ejaculations and—more than once—almost choking over a ripping oath which he caught in the act of slipping out.

Farrington Mobbs cowered in a corner, shivering by spells, casting many a fearful glance through the window or toward the open door, like one who anticipates the coming of a dreaded enemy.

Top-Sawyer Sam, unusually grave and quiet for him, hardly removed his great eyes from the face of Berthine Tempest. With each change, with each movement, she seemed to increase in loveliness to his eyes.

"The infernal—Excuse me, ladies, but I really can't help it when I think of that devil—Ahem!"

And Squire Nelson coughed chokingly behind his trembling palm, turning fairly purple in the face.

"The heaviest blow to me is the fact that he can claim relationship to my child," murmured Mrs. Tempest.

"Unless he lied in that, as in all else!" flashed Berthine.

"I fear that hope will fail you, Miss Tempest," gravely uttered Top-Sawyer Sam, with his gray eyes fixed upon the face of the daughter, though his words seemed to be addressed to both as he added:

"There really is a Boyd Ashby, whose mother was the sister of Theron Tempest. I have good reason to know that Boyd Ashby is in this quarter of the country, and from what I have learned from Squire Nelson regarding the personal appearance of this fellow, he must be the original of that name."

"And you don't know the worst of him, either!" exploded Nelson, excitedly. "It was to expose and punish the scoundrel that brought us here in such hot haste. He's escaped, but we'll ruin his fine plans all the same. We'll—Mr. Mobbs, tell the ladies what you know about that infernal scoundrel! Tell them—or I'll do it my own self!"

"As I can add nothing to the story, may I beg to be excused for a few minutes?" ventured Top-Sawyer Sam, with a swift glance into the face of the younger lady as though it was her permission he coveted most. "I reckon I can do more good to the cause by having a chat

with yonder tall fellow—the overseer, I reckon?"

"Jupiter Moxon, our overseer and manager," bowed Berthine, for the first time looking fairly into the face of the young man.

She seemed just a trifle surprised by what she saw, or at least Top-Sawyer Sam fancied as much. A tinge of color came into her soft cheeks as she rose to her feet, adding:

"After what has occurred—after this disagreeable exposure—Mr. Moxon may be a little suspicious of strangers. He is peculiar in his manner, sometimes, but he means well and is thoroughly devoted to our interests. If—"

"If the squire would give him a word by way of recommendation; or if—if he could assure you, Miss Tempest," hesitated the gambler, actually blushing a bit at his audacity.

"You can trust him as you would me, Miss Berthine," quickly cried the lawyer, glancing around with an emphatic nod. "Just tell Moxon from me that he can trust Sam Cary with the apple of his eye, if needs be!"

"If it would not be too great a boon to ask, Miss Tempest, I would be immensely obliged to you," murmured Top-Sawyer Sam, rising to his feet with a humble bow.

Blushing, confused, she could not herself have told why, Berthine moved toward the front door, followed by the gambler. Very briefly she performed her mission, and then returned to the house, followed by those brilliant gray eyes until she disappeared from view.

Coldly, with a stony gaze, Jupiter Moxon watched the River Rex until Top-Sawyer Sam turned toward him, once more his wonted self, cool, keen-witted, glib-tongued and hearty of manner.

"A fine place, and mighty nice people, I take it, friend!" he said, as he opened a case of cigars and extended it toward the manager. "You have a mighty comfortable sit. I reckon, generally speaking; but from what I heard in there, it isn't all a bed of roses!"

"I'm not grumblin' much," gravely nodded Moxon, clipping the end off a cigar with a broad-bladed bowie-knife slipped from behind his neck. "As fer what you hearn—I wasn't nigh enough to ketch it."

Top-Sawyer Sam laughed lightly as they moved slowly away from the house. He saw that Jupiter Moxon was a character in his own way, and was not sorry to make the discovery. Better than one of the common run, who had more tongue than eyes, with less wits than either.

"I was hinting at this affair of Boyd Ashby, of course. That is what brought us here to-day, and we rather counted on catching the fellow unawares. You reckon he's lit out for good?"

"He's gone, be it fer good or fer evil, that's sart'in."

"And you're not turning your eyes red with grief, eh?"

"I hated to see him go—jest the way he did."

Top-Sawyer Sam gazed keenly into that leather-like face. So far as it was concerned, he might as well have scanned a mask of dry hide; but there was something in the glittering eyes, no longer stony and expressionless, that told him much.

"Look ye, Moxon," he said, with blunt openness, facing around so that the overseer was compelled to stop short to avoid a collision. "I don't blame you for keeping a close tongue with a stranger, but I've got good reasons for wanting you to tell me all you can about this Boyd Ashby and his doings here. To show that I'm meaning well: listen."

In brief sentences Top-Sawyer Sam laid bare the plot which was based on the will of Theron Tempest, adding the part he proposed to take in baffling the cunning schemers.

"The squire is in the game, and he is ready to vouch for me. I'm not so sure you can say anything to help the matter along, but if you can, it's your duty to do so, for the sake of your young mistress."

Jupiter Moxon watched the speaker intently through all this, and when he ceased speaking Top-Sawyer Sam had made another firm friend.

The overseer told him all he knew concerning the plot. Told how Boyd Ashby gained an entrance and firm footing at the house, through the mock kidnapping and rescue. How Uncle Zero, led to espial by his strong suspicions, was taken captive and hurried off to a negro trader who asked no questions that might rob him of a cheap bargain.

"The old man was kerried off down the river, an' hed a monstrous tough time gittin' away from the nigger-thief. But he *did* git away, an' though he was hunted mighty hard, he give the dirty whelp the slip, an' got here just after day-dawn. He lay hid until he could send me word, an' I told the madam the same story he told me, when we rigged up a little trap fer to ketch Ashby into. *Did* ketch him, too!"

With an eloquence that fairly surprised himself, Jupiter Moxon went on to narrate what followed, but there is no need of our transcribing his words; the substance has already been recorded.

"It cut mighty deep to let him go without

even one strip to mark the nigger-stealer, but then was my orders from the madam, an' I hed to 'bey them, of course."

Through it all Top-Sawyer Sam said nothing, his face grave, and his gray eyes filled with a blazing light. When he did speak, his tones were hard and impressive.

"I know something of this Boyd Ashby. I know that he won't give up the fight until he has to. You'll see or hear more of him—"

"It'll be only the one sight, then!" grimly laughed Moxon.

"If he comes skulking around here, and you can't take him prisoner, shoot him down as you would a hungry wolf in the sheep-fold!" sternly uttered the River Rex, graver than ever. "Your duty to your young mistress is paramount—no harm must come to her! let the cost to others be what it may."

"I've put the hands on guard, an' the houn's is turned loose from this time on," was the grim response. "I kin go a week 'thout sleep when it's the young mistress that's in danger."

Just then Squire Nelson called to Top-Sawyer Sam, who immediately obeyed the summons, to find that all had been explained and a course of action pretty well decided upon.

"You are better acquainted with the river travel than any of the rest; what do you advise?" asked the lawyer, after a brief resume.

"If Mr. Mobbs has not mistaken the date, we have eleven days to go on, counting from the coming midnight. That is ample time, surely."

"If there is no serious delay in catching a boat."

"That is hardly probable at this time of the year. By the terms of the will a claim must be entered in person by Miss Tempest. There should be no difficulty in providing her with a safe escort to St. Louis. If I were an older acquaintance, I would gladly volunteer my services," with an eager light flashing into his eyes.

Squire Nelson rubbed his plump palms, chuckling heartily.

"Now you've made the offer, I don't mind admitting that I counted on your company, almost as a matter of course. What say you, Mrs. Tempest? Will you trust the fair Berthine to us?"

"Willingly, Mr. Nelson," was the swift reply, accompanied by a bright glance that confirmed the earlier suspicions entertained by the River Rex as to the precise state of affairs between the twain.

"Then it is all settled, I believe," rising and taking up his hat. "We return to town, to complete our arrangements, leaving Miss Berthine to pack up what she requires for the trip. I'll come or send Cary for her, the moment we see or hear of a steamboat coming up-river."

There were a few parting words, but which need not occupy space in this connection. Top-Sawyer Sam had the pleasure of pressing Berthine's hands in parting, and even Farrington Mobbs seemed much more at ease than when entering the house.

Jupiter Moxon saw the safe, through the great gate, and the trio rode leisurely back toward town, Squire Nelson still greatly excited, his tongue wagging as freely as though "it was hung in the middle."

He had little competition to overcome. Farrington Mobbs was too busy easing himself in the saddle, and mentally praying that they ride the whole distance at the same leisurely pace, while Top-Sawyer Sam was remarkably grave and silent for him.

At length the lawyer observed this, and cried out:

"What's come over you all of a sudden, Cary? Do you think we're playing nutes to a funeral? By my soul! I never knew you to so nearly resemble a death's head before. What's gone wrong with you, man?"

"I've been thinking over this will business," was the slow reply.

"Well, what do you see in it that draws your lips down to your waist? Isn't it all clear sailing from this on? Why, man! I'm just as certain that we hold the winning cards as I am that the sun shines up yonder—and most abominably hot, too," brushing the perspiration from his glowing countenance as he added: "What easier? We'll catch a boat in plenty time. We'll get to St. Louis with days to spare. I've got all the documents necessary to prove the identity of our client, and not even that pettifogging shyster, Tremont Parrish, can throw us out of court. And even if anything should happen to delay us beyond the hour set, can't we plead fraud and foul play? Thousands to units I can break the will on that plea, if worst comes to worst."

"That is what bothers me, squire," with a faint smile that vanished as soon as born. "You've got too good a case. I'd feel heap better if I knew that Miss Tempest would fail completely."

"What the Old Boy!" gasped Nelson, staring at the speaker. "Have you gone crazy, Sam Cary?"

"I expect you'll accuse me of it, if not worse," never than ever. "I mean just what I say. I hope from the bottom of my heart that some-

thing may hinder Miss Tempest from reaching St. Louis in time. Why? Because I've made up my mind—I've even sworn—to win her love, and the odds will be less heavy against me if she loses this fortune."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ENTERED FOR THE GOLDEN STAKES.

SQUIRE NELSON stared open-mouthed at the River Sport, too astounded by this speech to utter a word in reply.

Top-Sawyer Sam paused for a few moments as though he rather expected an explosion on the part of the naturally choleric judge, but as this was not forthcoming he soberly added:

"You reckon I've gone crazy, and I don't know as I blame you so mighty much. It does sound like a wild bluff when put into shape, but I never was more in earnest in all my life than I am at this minute."

"But you—"

"Never laid eyes on the young lady until a bit ago—precisely," nodded Top-Sawyer Sam, though he knew well enough that these were not the words that rose chokingly in the throat of the startled lawyer. "All the same, old friend, I've known her long enough to sink in love with her deep as—deep as you are in love with her mother!"

Leaning over in the saddle with his lips almost brushing the ear of the lawyer, Sam breathed these words, drawing back with a half-malicious, half-daring smile on his face and glowing in his eyes.

The shot sped home. Squire Nelson flushed almost purple and mumbled something about postponing the matter until they were in greater privacy.

Be sure Top-Sawyer Sam was nothing loth. He had spoken the truth of his sentiments on the impulse of the moment, and although he would not confess even to himself that he had acted unwisely, he was still cool enough to know that he had nothing to lose and all to gain by giving Squire Nelson time for deliberation.

The remainder of that ride was a silent one. Nelson hardly spoke a word, so troubled were his thoughts by that impetuous speech. Aside from the admitted fact that Samuel Cary was a professional gambler, in an era when all laymen played cards more or less, he knew nothing to his serious discredit. Yet, most assuredly he was not a man whom he, as the prospective step-father to Berthine, would select as her mate, or even to see come a-wooing her.

Top-Sawyer Sam took care not to break in upon his thoughts, and Farrington Mobbs was too wholly occupied in easing himself over the many jolts and rough places in that portion of his life, to pay much attention to either of his companions.

Squire Nelson regained his shaken composure by the time town was reached, and before quitting their horses a common rendezvous was agreed upon and an understanding reached that they should meet for consultation that same evening.

Vicksburg was familiar ground to the River Rex, and before he was fairly settled at the hotel which he selected as most convenient to the levee where all steamboats landed, he was greeted by a dozen old acquaintances, more than one of whom was eager to learn the truth of the startling story brought by the "Old Hickory."

Top-Sawyer Sam gave them plenty of words, but very little information that was new. There had been an "accident," he had escaped, thanks to a drifting tree, through Catfish Cut-off. He and his fellow-adventurer had landed near the mouth of the cut-off, and were fortunate enough to attract attention from a down-bound steamer, by means of which they reached Vicksburg in tolerable condition.

In return, Sam, without actually asking questions, managed to learn that Yellowhammer Jones had left the Old Hickory at Vicksburg; and that he had been seen in company in town that afternoon with Boyd Ashby.

As soon as he could do so without arousing suspicions of his real purpose, Top-Sawyer Sam got rid of his visitors and left the hotel, on a still-hunt for the two desperate schemers.

Fortunately for all concerned, perhaps, he failed to find either; Ashby and Jones being at that time well on their way down the river.

True to his promise, Squire Nelson called at the hotel that evening, and together they went over the cause which they had taken up with such enthusiasm, clearing away each knotty point until the whole matter seemed thoroughly understood by each. Then, as nearly as might be, they agreed upon the course they were to follow.

This was not difficult to arrange. They were to hold themselves in readiness for the first up-bound boat. Nelson was to remain in town to make sure of holding the vessel until Sam could bring Berthine Tempest from Randolph Place to take passage for St. Louis.

"It's more than likely that we'll have to do the waiting, but the case is too important to run the slightest unnecessary risk. That rascally Ashby might even be aboard, and trying to hire the captain to pull out without warning!" declared the lawyer, who seemed to regard

their chief enemy as little short of Satan himself.

Top-Sawyer Sam reported his vain search for their antagonists in this game for gold, and hinted that it was barely possible that Boyd Ashby had been frightened off; that they would have no more trouble with him after his thorough exposure of that day.

"You don't really believe that?"

"He is not in town, at any rate. He may have taken the boat down-river, or he may be skulking around Randolph Place. If the last, and Jupiter Moxon claps hands on him, we'll have no more trouble from that quarter!"

Squire Nelson took his departure without having mentioned the half-confession, half-vow with which Top-Sawyer Sam had startled him a few hours earlier. Nor did the River Rex care to revive the matter just then. He knew that time would prove his stout ally, and the longer Nelson took to deliberate over it, the greater his chance of finding a friend and ally in that quarter.

Early in the forenoon of the next day, a boat was sighted down the river, and leaving Squire Nelson in charge, with Farrington Mobbs clinging close to his heels, Top-Sawyer Sam took horse and rode at speed to Randolph Place.

He found Berthine ready for the trip, and her mother looking wonderfully well, considering all the excitement she had passed through of late.

The parting was cut short, for time might be very precious with so great a prize at stake, and then, escorted by Jupiter Moxon and half a dozen of their stoutest slaves, armed to the very teeth, the young couple rode away from the plantation, going to meet their fate.

They met with no adventure by the way, not a little to the disgust of Jupiter Moxon, who was fairly aching to lay hands on Boyd Ashby, now that he had free license to deal with him as the will prompted, and were met by Squire Nelson, in high good spirits.

"Fortune favors us, my dear child," he exclaimed, looking as though he would ask nothing better than to catch Berthine up in his arms for a mighty hug and hearty smack, right there in the street. "I've engaged passage on board the King Cotton—a clipper, if there's one on the river! She'll only stop a short time; is more than half-discharged at this very instant. Eleven days! Why, we'll get to St. Louis, wind up our business and find ourselves back here again before that time!"

Top-Sawyer Sam felt far less sanguine; or it might have been that his gravity was born of the very fact that caused the lawyer to show so much exultation. Victory for Berthine might mean defeat for him.

Little time was cut to waste in getting aboard the King Cotton, then one among the "crack boats" of the Mississippi River. Squire Nelson took Berthine to the state-room reserved for her occupation, bidding her remain therein until he should call for her, then returned to join Top-Sawyer Sam and Farrington Mobbs, who had stationed themselves where they could see every person who might come on or leave the boat.

"Have you made any discoveries?" whispered the lawyer, with a keen glance around over such of the passengers as were in view. "Haven't seen anything of—you understand? Never mind mentioning names."

"Nothing, as yet," was the quiet response. "Neither of the head rascals can cheat the eyes of our good friend Mobbsy, here, and I left him on guard while I took a little ramble through the boat. So far as I could make out, there's nobody aboard at all likely to give us any trouble."

"You looked at the register?"

"As a matter of form only. If either of our good friends were on board, bent on mischief, they'd hardly publish as much on the book."

Squire Nelson sidged about uneasily, staring at each strange face that came aboard as though he suspected a cunning mask. It had been his intention to keep Berthine under cover until the King Cotton had fairly resumed its journey up the river, but time lagged so heavily to his strained nerves, that he felt the maiden must be suffering tortures in her lonely state-room. And thus it came about that, when the boat at length pulled out from the levee, Berthine stood with her little escort near the front guards, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks aglow.

And Squire Nelson, with a subdued cheer, exclaimed:

"Fairly entered for the golden stakes, and a simple walk-over good as assured! Neither of those scoundrels aboard, and plenty of time before us! Only for attracting attention, wouldn't I holler, though!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DADDY M'CANN, FROM ARKANSAW.

"THAT'S who I am, gentlemen, all. Daddy McCann, from Arkansaw, with five hundred bales of cotton in one pocket, balanced by a dozen buck niggers in t'other!"

"Raised on the Washita flats, of course!" laughingly retorted one of the passengers near the bar at which this speech was delivered.

"That's whar you're yelpin' on a mighty cold scent, stranger," with a hoarse, half drunken

laugh. "Raised right yar on the Massis'ip, an' harvested by Daddy McCann, helped along by pure grit an' ondefiled bluffin' ef I do say so my own self. Waded in with a roll like this leetle finger, an' come out with a haystack big enough to buy out all Arkansaw. An' all raked in 'twixt St. Louey an' Orleans, an' this fur back ag'in!"

"Hit the lads hard, did you?"

"Waal, ef I didn't!" with a chuckle that shook him from top to toe as he grasped the bottle and refilled his glass in company with the majority of those standing near by. "Never hed so much fun crowded in so short a time sense I was pupped. Never hed—but it's powerful quar how sech monstrous lies do blow out to the wilderness from riverways! Why, when I told the neebors I was gwine to swarm down river fer to make or bust, they jes' got up on thar hind laigs an' howled at the bar'ideel. I wouldn't git more'n two squints at a steamboat afore I'd be stripped clean to my hide—so I wouldn't! The speckilators'd jes' nat'ally flay me afore I hed time to squeal once!"

"And your neighbors proved false prophets, of course?"

"They lied from 'sa'm to doxsology, stranger, an' thar's a fistful o' rags that sais so!" chuckled the rough old codger, slapping a thick roll of bank-notes on the polished bar as he spoke. "That's jes' the loose change I tote in my pocket fer to pay my whisky bills, but it's a sample o' the hull crap. I've got the heft on it stowed away in—waal, whar it kin show up in a hurry ef they's any show o' ketchin' more o' the same color, ye know!" with a leer of owlish wisdom as he thrust all save one note back into his pocket. "He'p me to drink this up, gentlemen, ef ye don't want to see Daddy McCann, from Arkansaw, make a holy hog o' himself!"

Until now the old fellow had been set down pretty generally as a member from one of the back counties, whose tongue formed the most important part of his bigness; but now the very ones who set out to cover him with ridicule, seemed to feel the deepest interest in the man.

He was a sturdy-built fellow, though his broad back was bowed as though from much hard labor. His face was covered with a shaggy, grizzled mass of beard, looking odd enough in that age of smooth faces. His hair, coarse and matted, hung to his shoulders from beneath a battered felt hat, worn and greasy, guiltless of band or binding, and carrying a full dozen bullet-holes through rim and crown.

His garments were in perfect keeping with all the rest: of heavy tow, coarse and dyed with butternut, the trowsers tucked into the wrinkled tops of horsehide boots, red and rough as though they had been nightly soaked in dew for an age. A leather belt surrounded his waist, but if he carried any weapons they were not visible to the outward eye.

"Jes' Daddy McCann, ye know, born in old Kaintuck an' raised in Arkansaw; the durndest fool ye ever run across in a month's journey! But he was weaned on mountain-dew, an' cut his teeth on a pack o' keerds! Jes' a durned ole idjit, but—I kin play the socks right off o' the smartest an' best an' grittiest speckilator as ever 'vented cheatin' at keerds! I kin out-hold the luckiest sharp as ever was nussed by good luck, an' when I kain't git the right keerds I kin bluff him off till it makes him sick to the soles o' his boots! That's my pedigree, gentlemen, an' still I'm jes' Daddy McCann, from Arkansaw!"

One of the passengers standing near, but not of those drinking at the expense of the garrulous old fellow, cast a covert glance in the direction of a tall, athletic, handsome figure near the office-rail, now took advantage of the brief lull to call out:

"You swept the river going down, you say, stranger?"

"From St. Louey to New Orleans—no funder then that!" with a grin.

"A modest stretch, but there's generally some smart fingers and cool heads scattered along the way. You downed them all, of course. Was Top-Sawyer Sam among the number?"

The words were uttered quietly enough, but they caused a stir in the ranks, and more eyes than one pair turned toward the tall gentleman who was quietly conversing with the clerk over the office-rail.

"That's what I'm pourin' all this pizen down fer, gents," said Daddy McCann, with sudden dejection in both face and voice. "Tell the honest truth, it was the powerful yarns I hearn 'bout that very critter as sot me dead-bent on takin' a swarm down the drink. They was too mighty long an' wide fer one man to swaller, ye see. I swore to the neebors that I b'lieved it was all durn lies! They wasn't no sech critter as Top-Sawyer Sam. Ef they was, he couldn't play keerds fer sour apples. Ef he could play, I was his master from 'sa'm to doxsology with the prayerbook o' sinners in my fist."

"That's what I said, strangers, an' that's what I sot out to make good afore I come back home ag'in. But I couldn't find no Top-Sawyer Sam. They told me he was ginewine, an' that he was the broom o' the hull river; but I couldn't find him, nohow!"

"That's your good luck, daddy," with a meaningful laugh.

"Which is jes' what I knows I'll hev to grin under when I git back home," with a gloomy shake of his shaggy head. "I've got the rags to back up what I tell 'em, but they's some durned contrairy critters as'll be jes' mean enough fer to hint that I ketched a drunken planter an' went through his wardrobe when they wasn't nobody lookin' on! Now, ef I could jes' run up ag'inst this Top-Sawyer critter I'd skin him to the buff, an' then give him back his clo'es in 'change fer a sort o' 'stiffkit sayin' he wasn't no more'n a tit on a hog 'longside Daddy McCann when it come to ginewine skientific card-wollopin', don't ye see?" Why, gents, I'd give a fistful o' good rags jes' fer onesquint at this mighty river-boss they call Top-Sawyer Sam!"

"Don't you reckon you've howled enough about that name, old man?" coldly uttered the tall gentleman by the office rail, rising up and stepping forward. "I'm Top-Sawyer Sam."

"You ain't—be yef!" spluttered Daddy McCann, choking himself in his haste to drop his glass and stare at the speaker.

"How can I convince you?" smiled the River King. "You're both too old and too drunk for me to think of thrashing you for doubting my word."

"They's one way—one way mighty short, too!" mumbled the old sport, his dark eyes glowing vividly as he reeled unsteadily toward a card-table in Social Hall. "Come an' see me, you! Come an' wool or git wooled—an' I'm bettin' big rags that you'll find it heap more one than t'other ef you take a whirl with Daddy McCann!"

Even then Top-Sawyer Sam hesitated, though not a man present, unless it may have been the rural member, misinterpreted his action.

"Cowed, an' never a keerd turned!" with a hoarse, insulting laugh. "You Top-Sawyer nothin'! You play—oh, I'm gittin' sleepy!"

"You will have it, then?" coldly smiled the River Rex, as he strode forward and dropped into a chair opposite the rough fellow. "It looks like stooping mighty low, but if nothing else will satisfy you—"

"Nothin' shorter then a 'stiffkit sayin' that I licked you out o' your own mem'ry playin' keerds, Sammy," chuckled Daddy McCann, calling for fresh cards, which were promptly furnished by the barkeeper. "I've got money enough; more then I know what to do with, ye see, an' it's jes' the 'stiffkit I'm wantin' so mighty bad, to flop in the faces o' the neebors when they begin to snort an' snicker like—durn your money! I've got too much o' my own!"

"That's a calamity easily removed, Daddy," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, as he tore the cover off a pack of cards, pushing them over to his uncouth adversary. "I don't often do it, but since you've taken the liberty to chew on my name for two hours past, I'll have to play the stripper, and clothe you in return for a 'stiffkit."

"Say ye will?" drawled the old fellow, with a broad grin.

"Obliged to, Daddy. And to make it all the more binding, you can pick your own game. I like to see a man twisting the hemp that is to hang him; there's something so soothing about it all!"

"You kin lick me at jawin' slick words, but you can't down me at keerds, nohow! Poker, then; that'll strip you quicker'n any other game!"

"Poker goes. Your passage-money is paid, I trust, Daddy?" drawled Top-Sawyer Sam, as McCann rapidly rifled the cards. "Not that it matters so much, for the captain will hardly permit a naked passenger to linger on board, even as a lower-deck stowaway. Sorry, but you would have it so, old fellow!"

Half drunk as McCann seemed, he showed signs of growing anger as a low laugh ran around the crowd, drawn near the table by what had already passed between the pair. He scowled blackly as he slapped the deck down for the cut.

From that moment Top-Sawyer Sam was cold, grave, impassive; the very ideal of a thoroughbred gamester.

Daddy McCann, to the contrary, was garrulous, now exulting as fortune favored him, now growing and grumbling, cursing himself, the cards, the crooked luck and all else when he lost a pot in turn. He called repeatedly for whisky or rum, swallowing it raw, like so much water. He seemed to grow drunker with each deal, but for all that he never made a mistake against himself while manipulating the cards, so far as any of those surrounding the table could see during the first hour.

Like a true gambler, Top-Sawyer Sam paid far more attention to his adversary than to his own cards. A single glance sufficed for them, but not a motion, not a sign escaped his keen eyes. Early in the game he believed he detected an attempt at cheating on the part of Daddy McCann, but he said nothing. That, however, goes without saying.

No professional ever sits down to play with another in the same class without expecting to be cheated if he is dull-eyed enough to permit it.

If he is a gambler through avarice, he himself expects to make the most of his winning through still more adroit cheating. If he is what is called a "square player," he will cheat in self-defense when he detects foul play; but if he is a "thoroughbred," no matter how heavy his losses may be, he will never excuse himself on the plea of having been cheated. That would brand his own skill too deep.

For some little time the play was hardly interesting enough to pay for the close attention given the game by the passengers gathered around. Small hands were the rule, and loudly as he had boasted, Daddy McCann played guardedly. Top-Sawyer Sam simply followed the lead set him. He had his own reasons for so acting. He knew that if Daddy McCann had really been so anxious to encounter him across the table, he would surely have found him out long ere this.

Who he was, if not the character he carried out so well, Top-Sawyer Sam could not have said with certainty when he sat down to the table. He felt, rather than knew, that the rough old fellow was playing a part for some particular end, and while simply keeping the game going, he was using his eyes to the best of his ability.

At length he knew that Daddy McCann was coming to the point. For a number of hands back he had detected him in false play, and quietly formed a counter-mine, patiently awaiting the proper moment for exploding it. That was not much longer delayed.

Daddy deat, and both drew two cards. Top-Sawyer Sam silently bet, McCann raised, was seen and raised again. Then the fun waxed hot and furious. Back and forth the bets were lifted, until a pile of money, running far up into the thousands, half-filled the table. Then Daddy was forced to call, and exultantly spread a routine flush, with a king at the head. And with a deft movement Top-Sawyer Sam strung his hand beside it: a flush of spades, with ace at the top, followed by king, queen, knave and ten-spot!

Exclamations of amazement rose from the spectators, but Daddy McCann gave a mad roar of baffled rage as he jerked forth a pistol—thrusting it fairly into the face of Top-Sawyer Sam, snarling:

"Take that, you cheating devil!" as he pulled trigger.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LECTURE CUT SHORT.

NOTHING but superb nerve and marvelous rapidity of action could have saved Top-Sawyer Sam from death in that crisis.

The pistol was thrust fairly into his face, and there was death in the dark eyes that glared at him across the weapon; but a lightning-swift movement knocked the pistol up, just as his head swerved to one side, and though the explosion seemed to come simultaneously, the bullet spent its force on the carved ceiling instead.

It was a continuation of the movement that carried Top-Sawyer Sam around the table and upon Daddy McCann, who seemed taken wholly by surprise. The death of his antagonist had looked so certain, that he had thought of nothing beyond—had prepared for nothing further.

Perhaps it was just as well for him, for in those few moments Top-Sawyer Sam was in a dangerous mood, cool and steady-nerved though he appeared, even while grappling with, disarming and heaving the treacherous rascal clear of the floor, holding him at arm's length above his head as though about to dash him down to death or disability.

With sharp cries of mingled fear and anger, the crowd scattered as Daddy McCann made his murderous assault, more than one of their number tripping and sprawling at length as they fled with eyes over shoulder in readiness to dodge flying lead. Some flashed forth their own weapons, with angry cries against the desperado, but for the first few moments not a hand was near enough to aid or foil either antagonist.

A hoarse, rasping curse came from the lips of Daddy McCann as the River Rex twisted him from his footing and tossed him high into the air; a cry that changed to a terrified appeal as he felt those mighty muscles quiver in readiness to dash him down to the floor. A sound that was purely involuntary, but none the less craven in every note.

"You yelp, do you?" laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, with a swift movement setting the desperado on his feet, with face jammed close up against the white and gilded door of a state-room. "Stay put, Daddy! If you dare to show your sweet face before I give you permission, or—"

"Hang him! Lynch the scoundrel!"

Not from one voice but from a score came these savage cries, and there was death in the notes to those experienced ears.

Top-Sawyer Sam, with his left hand firmly grasping the neck of his adversary, driving his face still closer to the door, partly turned to the excited crowd with uplifted hand; in which showed a cocked pistol.

"Draw it mild, gentlemen, if you love me!"
 "Lynch him! He's not fit to live among white men!"

"Draw it mild—if you love life, then!" amended Top-Sawyer Sam with sudden emphasis as the muzzle of his pistol swept swiftly over the lines of wrathful faces. "I'm mild and harmless as new milk if you give me room to breathe, but if you crowd me too close—I'm prussic acid, in doses ready for all who come within the magic circle."

Cold, measured, metallic, each syllable distinctly audible, that bit of a speech proved enough to send the excited, indignant, blood-thirsty crowd back a pace or two.

"You are laboring under a false impression, gentlemen," with something of his old-time lightness coming to the surface. "You think this was an attempt at assassination—"

"What else was it, we'd like to know?" cried a sturdy voice.

"Simply a fit of nervousness on the part of our good friend, Daddy McCann from Ark—Will you stay put, my fine fellow?"

As though just beginning to realize his ignominious defeat, Daddy McCann gave a desperate effort, trying to break away from that steady grip on his neck. Only to have his face ground harshly against the painted woodwork, and a second hand strike down his clutching fingers as they shot up to close on that steel-like arm.

A hot breath fanned his cheek, and a stern warning hissed into his ear, low and guarded, but full of meaning:

"Try any more tricks, you villain, and I'll show you up to the crowd! I'll throw you into their hands, and tell them enough of your past to win you a dozen ropes!"

"All we ask for is common justice, Mr. Cary," said a clear, resolute voice from the group of passengers. "That fellow tried to assassinate you—"

"And failed. If I'm not kicking, what is it to the rest of you?" curtly interjected the River Rex.

"Such a cur is out of place on a boat patronized by gentlemen, Mr. Cary, and you know it! He might have hit any one of us, and—"

"Missed you all. Are you weeping because there is no funeral in prospect?" with an icy coldness in his tones that contrasted sharply with the vivid flames that seemed to flash from his eyes. "That may still be remedied. All you have to do is to keep on crowding me as you have begun. I'll furnish the material for as many funerals as you care to have, if nothing but a free circus will satisfy you!"

Daddy McCann gave a sullen growl.

"Give me half a show and I'll fight you to the death!"

"You've had your show, Daddy," with sharp emphasis. "And you, gentlemen, have had yours. What remains is simply between Daddy and myself, and I reckon we are quite competent to settle our little discussion without any outside assistance. This to gentlemen: if there are any among you who are not included in that term, let them show their colors and reap the consequences! Come, Daddy!"

A twist of his wrist whirled the desperado about, and he slipped one hand through the right arm of the half-choked rascal as he spoke. His own right hand still grasped a pistol, and its grim muzzle seemed to threaten all alike as it rested lightly along his broad chest.

The passengers, some laughing and cheering, others grim and sullen, gave way before the River Rex as he deliberately moved toward the cabin, then with tables cleared and closed in little compass, with the ladies' cabin shut off for the night.

Not a hand was lifted to check that advance, nor a body to block their way. Top-Sawyer Sam looked in a dangerous mood, and even though many present knew him only by reputation, none cared to cross him then.

Daddy McCann scowled viciously as he watched his chance, but none came his way. That ugly muzzle was covering his person, and a touch of the finger that rested near the trigger would forever end his career.

Top-Sawyer Sam did not go far away from Social Hall, for his sole motive was to gain a position from whence his words need not be caught by the curious ears of the passengers who kept watch on their actions.

"You've played it well, Daddy McCann," he said, with a sneer of mingled scorn and disgust in his low, clear tones. "You've pulled the wool over the eyes of some mighty keen fellows, out yonder; but I know you from A to Ampersand."

"You'll know me better if I git a chance fer ter—"

"Drop that lingo, Daddy, for you're only losing your breath for naught. I said I knew you; shall I prove it, Boyd Ashby?"

"I don't know what you're tryin' to git through ye," sullenly muttered the other, but with a shivering start that betrayed his alarm and uneasiness. "I never hearn tell o' no Boyd Ashby."

"A liar born, a liar bred, a liar through all!" with stinging scorn in face and voice. "You are Boyd Ashby. You are playing a desperate

game for the millions left behind him by Theron Tempest. Exposed back at Randolph Place, you took a disguise and stole after the real heir—*for what?* To add murder to your other crimes, no doubt."

"I'll split your heart for this, curse you!" snarled the villain.

"Look out that you don't find your throat in a tight noose, first, Boyd Ashby," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, growing colder, steadier, as his antagonist flushed with fierce heat. "I knew there was something wrong when you first began shooting off your mouth, but I couldn't exactly place you until I saw you fingering the cards. Then I knew your little game just as surely as though you had it written in plain characters on your forehead. You were playing for an opening to shuffle me off the stage. You openly cheated at play, hoping I would kick, and so give you a chance to drop me with a snap-shot. Instead, I countermined you, and forced you to do the touching off—with what result?"

He paused, as though expecting a retort of some sort, but none came. Boyd Ashby—if this rude fellow was indeed that personage—said naught, only glowering, watching for an opening to get square.

Colder, sharper, more determined than before, Top-Sawyer Sam added:

"You have forfeited your life by your actions, and a word from my lips would send you to death by the rope. You know that! But I'll not speak that word unless you force me to do so. Some day you may learn just why I spare you; until then, exercise your wits."

"One warning: drop your schemes against Miss Tempest. Dare to try aught against her or her interests, and true as there is a heaven over our heads, I'll expose you to the passengers. I'll tell them all you have done. I'll lay bare all your infernal iniquity. I'll bid them deal out to you the penalty your crimes so richly merit, and—"

At this point of his warning Top-Sawyer Sam was abruptly cut short by a tremendous shock that made the boat quiver from stem to stern—that hurled almost every person aboard to the decks, shouting and screaming, moaning and groaning; fairly beside themselves with stark terror!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA.

ALL was confusion the most intense. Passengers were tumbled about as though suddenly deprived of life so far as stability was concerned. Glassware crashed and shattered. Lamps were hurled from brackets, to add the fear of flames to all else. Timbers groaned and creaked, as if the good boat was going to pieces.

Sam was hurled headlong to the cabin-deck, while Boyd Ashby lay quivering, insensible, at the foot of a table, one corner of which had cut his scalp wide open.

With screams and yells of frantic fear, the passengers scrambled to their feet as best they might, rushing out of the cabin, expecting with each instant to be hurled into the muddy waters as the timbers spread open beneath their very feet.

"Steady, men!" shrieked the captain, as he fought his way to the door. "There's no danger! We've run on a bar—no more!"

It is strange what effect a single voice will sometimes have over a panic-stricken mass. Although reflection would have told them that the captain could know no more what had happened than any one of their number, since he had been with them in Social Hall, his words carried conviction to many a sorely frightened heart, and the cry was at once taken up by a score of loud voices:

"Only a bar! Grounded—nothing worse than that!"

Unconsciously—or instinctively, it may be—the captain had uttered the simple truth. The steamboat was aground, with its bows buried deep in the wet sands, turned from its proper course at an abrupt angle, as though the pilot had suddenly lost his senses, or else was willfully seeking to wreck the vessel!

Top-Sawyer, as soon as he could recover his footing, rushed at once to the ladies' cabin, with thoughts of Berthine Tempest. Past experience warned him of the peril which threatens a panic-stricken mass of women; he knew how often death had followed a less startling accident than this; how women, in wild terror, had flung themselves headlong over the guards to find death in the rushing waters.

Much such a scene now met his eyes. Women, some dressed, others in their night-robes, screaming and rushing frantically from their rooms, and more than one only restrained from leaping into the dark river by their husbands or fathers.

Berthine was pale and frightened, but still mistress enough of her wits to avoid such insanity as this. And with Squire Nelson, Top-Sawyer Sam found little difficulty in reassuring the maiden.

By the time something like order was restored below, a fresh cause for excitement, if not positive alarm, was discovered above. The captain

found the pilot who had been on duty lying beside his wheel, bleeding and insensible, with an ugly gash in the back of his head!

With difficulty he was restored to consciousness enough to brokenly explain what had happened, so far as he knew. And a chorus of startled cries arose as the statement was caught up by the passengers.

Condensed, the story told by the pilot amounted to this:

He was on duty alone, his assistant having left him but a few minutes before, having been called from his post at the wheel by a man who said the captain wished to see him for a few moments. He, the injured pilot, thought nothing strange of this, nor did he suspect aught when he heard steps and saw a tall figure approaching the wheel-house. He just glanced that way as the man opened the rear window, and asked what was wanted. He could not swear to the answer; he was just then giving the wheel a turn to avoid striking against a huge log that came into the glow cast by the open furnaces. Then—he felt as though the smoke-stack had fallen upon his head.

The captain asked if he could guess who the tall man was, and the pilot promptly replied:

"Top-Sawyer Sam!"

For a few moments the wild outburst of rage was so great that the captain, strong-lunged though he was, could not make himself heard. Some cried out to lynch the cowardly assassin, and had Sam put in an appearance just then—as he did a few moments later—he would have been torn limb from limb by the infuriated crowd.

By dint of shouting and cursing, the captain made himself heard, and then cried out sharply:

"Top-Sawyer Sam is innocent as a babe unborn! He was below—I was watching him at the very instant the old scow struck! You can all bear me out in this, gentlemen, if you only take trouble to think!"

Instant silence fell over the mob of passengers. They stared at each other in ludicrous dismay, for now they one and all knew that the captain was speaking no more than the truth. They had been watching the outcome of the fracas between Daddy McCann and the very man whom they were but a moment since so eager to lynch.

This was the scene upon which Sam stepped, to be greeted with cheers by the very men who, only a breath before, had been execrating his very name. And be sure his amazement was no whit lessened when he found out what had happened.

He confronted the pilot, whom he knew fairly well, and asked him how he came to make such an unfortunate mistake in his assailant. The poor fellow seemed sorely puzzled, but declared that he could not even yet believe himself mistaken. He had recognized the figure, the voice, even, of Top-Sawyer Sam. He still believed that it was the hand of the River Rex that felled him so treacherously—that turned the wheel enough to send the boat head on to the sand-bar.

"It's a clew, anyhow," grimly laughed the gambler, as he turned away from the injured man with the captain. "Find a man of my build, who wasn't among the crowd down there, and I reckon you've got the fellow, captain."

"Pick your men from those you know and see that no one slips out of the boat," hurriedly muttered the captain. "I've got to see what harm's been done to the old scow, first of all."

More than half-believing this but another stroke by Boyd Ashby, moved by his brain though carried out by other hands, to win the fortune left by Theron Tempest, Top-Sawyer Sam promptly acted on the hurried advice of the captain. In a marvelously short time, trusty men were stationed at different points, keeping such a keen lookout that it would be impossible for a human being to abandon the vessel without being at once discovered by some one of the guards.

"Unless he's stole away in the first confusion, we'll have him foul, dead sure!" nodded the River Rex, with a grim, dangerous laugh.

The greatest point of interest, however, lay in ascertaining just what amount of damage had been done by that tremendous shock. Though the bows of the steamer lay high on the bar, apparently driven so deeply and firmly into the yielding sands that it would be impossible for the boat to sink deep enough under water to endanger the passengers, it was a dark night, and the sullen waters surrounded them on all sides. If the vessel was so injured as to fill with water, the passengers wanted to have all possible warning.

The report was encouraging enough at first glance. The bows had nobly withstood the shock. The vessel was tight as a drum, showing no signs of having been strained enough to leak a drop. As for filling and sinking, that could only be accomplished by the passengers falling to and filling her with buckets!

A bit of grim humor, which the captain, who uttered it, was probably the only one aboard who did not laugh at.

"Isn't it bad enough?" he growled, under his

breath. "Hard aground, and on a falling river! If I only could find the devil that did it all!"

Meanwhile, Top-Sawyer Sam was not idle.

He knew that Boyd Ashby himself could not have committed the foul deed, but he felt almost certain that one of his tools had run the vessel aground, to delay as much as possible their arrival at St. Louis. And naturally enough his thoughts reverted to Yellowhammer Jones—to send a swift glow of recognition into his gray eyes a moment later.

A bowed figure that would have been tall and muscular if drawn erect, caught his eye as he returned to the cabin below. He saw long black hair; a heavy beard of the same color; huge goggles of smoked glass; a garb that was ministerial in cut and texture.

But he saw still more than this: a covert signal pass between Boyd Ashby and this stranger, before either of them noticed his coming.

Without a sign Top-Sawyer Sam passed on to his state-room, leaping lightly to the upper berth, peering cautiously through the open transom to see the twain separate, and the spectacled passenger enter a state-room, while Boyd Ashby went to another, on the opposite side.

Waiting a few minutes until Ashby again came forth, this time to leave the cabin, Top-Sawyer Sam strode to the closed state-room, tapping softly and whispering in a fair imitation of Ashby's voice:

"Open up, mate! I've got something to tell you—something new!"

The click of a key, an opening door; then Top-Sawyer Sam hurled it wide open as he sprang inside, a pistol covering the startled inmate.

"Kick and you go down cold, Yellowhammer Jones!" he sternly uttered, one hand closing on the throat of the passenger like a vise.

The brief struggle tore away a false beard and revealed the face of the marooned gambler, stained a brown hue, but still unmistakable.

"How dare you intrude—" he gurgled, feebly trying to keep to his assumed character, until he saw the loose mass of hair drooping over the wrist of the River Rex.

"Drop that, Yellowhammer. I know you. I know that you tried to play me off on the pilot when you ran the boat ashore. I also know—"

"I don't understand you, Cary," muttered the gambler, huskily.

"You will before I bid you adieu, my dear fellow," smiled Top-Sawyer Sam, releasing the rascal and dropping his pistol-hand. "I've come here to give you one square chance for your miserable life. If you refuse to accept that chance, I'll turn you over to the passengers as the demon who tried to wreck the steamer. Take your choice!"

Yellowhammer Jones shivered, but quickly recovered himself.

"You are mad, Cary! I can prove I was in my bunk when the crash came! I had nothing to do with the affair—as why should I?"

"Do you want me to explain your reasons to the passengers and crew in their present state of mind, Yellowhammer?" coldly smiled the River Rex, with a warning gesture as the gambler softly stole a hand up toward his bosom.

"They would lynch me on your bare word!" with a sickly grimace. "Bad as you hate me, Cary, you're too white to lie a poor fellow to death!"

"I don't hate you too bad to tell them the simple truth. You *did* turn this trick. I know it. Still, you've got to confess, or—"

"You've got me foul, curse you!" with a vicious show of teeth. "You can blow me through before I could grip a weapon. Do it, then! I'll never own up to such a shameful lie!"

"You talk of shame, you treacherous cur!" with a vivid fire filling his eyes and flushing his cheeks. "You prate of shame, after the way you treated the man who risked his life to drag you worse than worthless carcass out of the water! You, who are scheming with another cowardly cur to cheat a lady out of her rightful property!"

"I owe you my life," slowly muttered Jones, with a sullen scowl. "You do well to remind me of that fact before making such baseless charges. But—even you may cross the safety line, Mr. Cary!"

Top-Sawyer Sam grew cold and hard as he listened. Then:

"With one word I can set the mob howling for your blood. If not on this score, I can by telling them how you acted on board the Old Hickory. I don't want to do this, for the sake of the lady whose name would have to be dragged into the muck. But, all the same, you can't get off without punishment, to play your sand-bagging act again."

"That means you're going to blow me through, of course!"

"I mean to shoot you, unless you prefer hanging by the mob. Swear that you will meet me on equal terms at the first chance—swear to accept my public challenge for a duel—and I'll keep dark all you've been guilty of, this night as well as on the other boat. Refuse, and I'll haul you before the pilot for his judgment! You can guess the rest!"

"I still deny everything you assert," grated

Yellowhammer, his teeth clicking viciously as he added: "But I'll fight you, when and how you please! Ay! and I'll kill you, too, for all your hollow bragging!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

ACCORDING TO THE CODE.

TOP-SAWYER SAM laughed mockingly, his gray eyes glowing.

"May your success be according to your merits, my dear fellow!"

Yellowhammer Jones showed his teeth after a disagreeable fashion, seeming to gain in coolness and nerve by the example set him thus.

"And you will have the grim pleasure of knowing that you dug your own grave, Mr. Cary. I regret it, as much on my own account as on yours. I owe you a life. I hoped one day to be enabled to cancel that debt—"

"With a sand-bag?" sneeringly interjected the River King.

Yellowhammer Jones gazed fair in the face of the speaker, and there was a cold surprise in his face, eyes and voice as he uttered:

"You mentioned that thing before, I believe. What am I to understand by it? What new crime have you hatched up against me?"

"An old one—old as that night when I caught your tools trying to murder Farrington Mobbs on board the Old Hickory. When you struck me from behind, coward-like, with a sand-club! Dare you deny it?"

"I dare—I do deny it!" in cold, steady accents.

"Then you'd best alter your name to Unlucky Jones, for I've taken solemn oath to punish you for that very deed," bowed Sam.

The gambler shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What matter? You want an excuse for your funeral; as well that as another. Shall we take the traveling public into our confidence?"

"If you prefer it so," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, really beginning to think better of the man whom he had sworn to read a severe lesson, now that he gave evidence of "nerve."

Yellowhammer made a light gesture, with a repetition of that shrug.

"You are acting as master of ceremonies, and I'll not interfere. It would be cruel to cut your reign short; I should say *shorter*!"

"So kind!" purred the River Rex, with another mock bow. "Since you leave it all to me, I'll try to do us both proud. When I want you I'll whistle! See that you obey, you cur, or so much the worse for your hide!"

Sharp and stinging came the last words, all the more effective because of their startling contrast with what went before.

Yellowhammer Jones stood like one already feeling the lash, and without another word Top-Sawyer Sam flung open the door and left the marooned gambler to his own reflections.

Although so confident that he had discovered the daring rascal who had impersonated him in that savage assault on the pilot, Top-Sawyer Sam said nothing of all this to the men whom he had put on guard about the boat. Possibly he anticipated an effort on the part of Yellowhammer Jones to escape the consequences of his crimes. Possibly he feared having his enemy taken out of his power by the angry passengers for lynching.

By this time the captain and his mates had brought order out of confusion, and were doing all that could be done to remove the King Cotton from its disliked resting-place. The engines were set to work, whirling the mighty wheels backward until the muddy waters were turned to froth and spray, until the mighty waves rolled in swift succession down the river, curling and breaking into white-caps; until the entire vessel quivered and throbbed like some living monster, stirred by the fierce pangs of coming dissolution.

The freight was moved further aft, leaving the forward half of the vessel wholly unincumbered. The fire-crates were blazing forth their ruddy light to guide the chorusing deck-hands as they swung the huge spurs over the bow at an acute angle. And then, the short, sharp barking of the donkey-engine set the ropes to moving through the sheaves in the effort to spar the vessel off the bar.

It was a picturesque scene that night of darkness, and by far the greater portion of the passengers were gathered on the guards to witness the labors of the swarthy hands below.

Among them stood Berthine Tempest, clinging to the sturdy arm of Squire Nelson. And close at hand, keen-eyed, ready-handed, Top-Sawyer Sam kept guard over her, though the maiden never so much as suspected this at the time.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, the great spars sunk into the sand before the vessel, but without stirring the King Cotton from its moist bed. The daring schemer had performed his work too thoroughly for that.

One by one the spectators wearied of the curious spectacle, and satisfied that there was no actual danger to be dreaded, beat a retreat to their state-rooms. In silence Top-Sawyer Sam saw Berthine Tempest go among the rest. He

longed to bid her good-night and pleasant dreams, but somehow he dared not. It may have been—

"I never felt so before," he muttered, frowning at himself. "If I was superstitious, I'd think it a mighty bad omen for my little racket with Yellowhammer in the morning."

Dawn was not so far distant now, and Top-Sawyer Sam gave no thought to his bed. He had perfect confidence in his nerves, and knew they were not likely to fail him when called upon for keen, sharp, clean work.

He went the rounds of his guards, dropping a word of encouragement here, and a ray of hope there, but taking care not to betray the discovery he had made on his own hook. Yellowhammer Jones should be punished, but he did not choose to share that duty with so many others.

With the first rays of dawn a hot breakfast was prepared for the weary captain and his assistants, together with those who cared to join in the early repast. Top-Sawyer Sam was among the number, and he smiled grimly as he saw both Daddy McCann and Yellowhammer Jones, the latter with renovated disguise, among the number.

The ladies' cabin was not yet opened, and the captain, contrary to his usual custom, was seated in the gentlemen's cabin during the meal.

"What are the prospects, captain?" asked Top-Sawyer Sam.

"Good—for sticking fast until the hot sun dries the old scow till her timbers yawn so wide you'd be willing to take oath you saw a stranded corn-crib!" was the sulky response. "I've only one hope left: that we may discover the infernal cur who stole a trick at the wheel!"

"I'm mighty glad I can prove an *alibi*," with a short laugh.

"You haven't found anybody that looks like the rascal?"

Top-Sawyer glanced slowly along the table, his gaze lingering for a single instant on the brown face of Yellowhammer Jones, who sat feeding in a stolid, unconcerned manner.

"Not yet, captain, though I'm not entirely without hopes. What do you reckon would be done with the fellow, if discovered?"

"I'd ram him into the furnace to make steam enough to spar the old scow off the bar—Satan burn him!" with vicious emphasis.

Sam let the matter drop, having drawn out enough, as he reasoned, to keep Yellowhammer Jones up to the sticking-point. He waited until the gambler arose from his seat, then quickly gained his side, hurriedly muttering:

"Hold yourself in readiness, with your second, if you've got one."

"I've left everything to you," was the cold retort. "It's *your* funeral. Make your own arrangements, and then you can't blame me for any oversight—when you take a ghostly stroll by moonlight!"

Top-Sawyer Sam bowed and left the gambler, not caring to attract attention lest the truth be suspected too soon. He had already made up his mind what to do, and lost no time in getting down to business.

A few words to Squire Nelson were quite sufficient to prepare that worthy. Advocate of the law though he was, the squire was Southron born and bred, and a devout believer in the code.

Another word drew a passenger, who was also a surgeon, into the little plot, and leaving the squire to select a second to serve the adversary, Top-Sawyer Sam hunted up the captain with a request for the use of the yawl for an hour or so.

"You have found the villain, then?" instantly demanded the captain, seeming to divine the truth by instinct.

Top-Sawyer Sam flatly denied this, but when he saw that the captain was not satisfied, he told him enough of the past truth to win him over; so completely that the honest fellow, saying that his mate could do all there was to be done on board, declared he was going along to see fair play.

There was no objection to this; indeed, Top-Sawyer Sam could have wished for nothing more favorable. Where the passengers might suspect the truth, if a party went ashore alone, the presence of the captain would guard against this.

Yellowhammer Jones was ready when his adversary gave the signal, and all entering the yawl, manned by a couple of strong-armed deck-hands, the party were rapidly pulled across to the right bank. Landing, the men were ordered to row back to the steamer, to return when summoned.

Yellowhammer Jones seemed content to rest his interests in the gentleman presented as his second, and bade him agree on all points suggested by the other party.

"All I ask is half a show," he said coldly. "You have gentlemen to deal with, and I'm not afraid they'll try to ring in a cold deck on us. Only—cut the preliminaries short as may be."

But Squire Nelson was a stickler for forms, and would not be hurried on such an important occasion. Top-Sawyer Sam had simply told him that a duel was on the tapis, but without

giving a hint as to who his adversary might be, or what the quarrel was about.

"There is no hopes of an amicable settlement, then?" the squire asked of his principal, when they had reached a comparatively clear spot not far from the river-bank, which would serve thir purpose as well as another. "If the gentleman offers to apologize?"

"No danger of that, squire," with a low, careless laugh.

"And of course we are not prepared to offer any?"

"I am not. We came out here to shoot or be shot."

"After the first interchange of shots—"

"There will be no need for a second shot," and as the squire bustled away to complete the arrangements, Top-Sawyer Sam passed over to where his adversary stood, muttering as he moved by him:

"Shoot straight, or suffer, Jones! Your good right hand has doubly offended me, and I'm going to read it a lesson!"

A sickly smile was the sole response to this covert threat. Yellowhammer Jones seemed cold and composed enough to the outward eye, but within he was sorely perturbed. Sin-burdened, crime-stained though his soul may have been, he was not altogether bad. Knowing as he did that a single word from Top-Sawyer Sam—the man who had dragged him out of the very jaws of death only a few short days before!—would doom him to a rope at the hands of an infuriated mob. Instead—he was to be given a fair chance to win his way clear; at the cost of Cary's life.

After the instruction each second had received from his principal, there was little to discuss between them. As a matter of course pistols were to be used, both because sanctioned by custom, and being more strictly in accordance with "the code," and from the fact that no other weapons were available. Of course knives were out of the question.

There was a little ceremonious argument as to the distance, but that was more to keep up appearances than for any real reason. Being so, the difficulty was quickly brushed aside, and the seconds returned to announce their decision to their principals.

The men were to be placed twelve paces apart; the tools, a pair of dueling-pistols which the surgeon kindly placed at their disposal; the seconds were to toss for choice of weapons, for positions, for the word; the manner of giving this word was in strict accordance with the code, of course.

Neither principal had a suggestion to offer. Both were perfectly familiar with the rules, and neither transgressed them in the slightest particular, leaving all save the actual interchange of shots to their representatives.

The two men took their positions and received the weapons which had been carefully loaded by the seconds in company. Cold and stern they awaited the signal, their armed hands hanging motionless at their sides until, sharp and clear, came the words:

"Ready; one—two—three—fire!"

Swift as thought Top-Sawyer Sam lifted his weapon, dwelling but an instant on his aim, then fired. An instant later he felt as if a hot iron was pressed to his cheek, but he never flinched an atom, a cold smile curling his lips as he saw Yellowhammer Jones reel sharply, a cry of bitter agony bars ing from his lungs.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HARD AGROUND AND RIVER FALLING.

THOUGH this was not his first appearance as second on the "field of honor," Squire Nelson, outwardly so calm and dignified, was actually sorely troubled over the matter. What if harm should befall Top-Sawyer Sam? What if he should be slain, leaving him alone to guard and protect Berthine Tempest against her cunning, unscrupulous enemies?

Although he had not witnessed the scene between the River Rex and Daddy McCann, he had heard enough that morning to fancy at least a part of the truth. And more than half-believing this Daddy McCann was one of the men playing for the fortune left by Theron Tempest, it was not difficult to trace the strange assault on the pilot and grounding of the steamer to the same source.

Small marvel, then, that he should watch his champion with such breathless interest while the word was pending; or that as soon as the shots were fired, he should hasten forward, almost afraid to utter the words that sprung to his lips:

"You are safe? You are not—great heavens!" with a cry that was almost a groan as he caught sight of blood on the face of his principal.

"You are hit—hit hard!"

"Only a graze, but—I told him so!" with a hard, merciless triumph in his face and voice as he saw Yellowhammer Jones reel and fall into the arms of his second, with right arm swaying helplessly by his side. "Your dealing days are over, my friend! And you'll have to use your left hand in playing the sand-bag from this on!"

Perhaps it was just as well that Squire Nelson was too greatly agitated to catch those words.

It spared Top-Sawyer Sam the need of an explanation which he preferred not to give if it could be avoided.

"Go and see just how bad the gentleman is injured, squire," he said, brushing the few drops of blood from his cheek, along which the lead of his antagonist had swept, so close as to break the skin. "I reckon he'll hardly have the stomach for a second shot; still, I am entirely at his service in case he does."

Satisfied that no harm had come to his principal, the squire lost no time in carrying out these instructions, but the answer was just as Top-Sawyer Sam anticipated; his bullet had terribly shattered the elbow of his antagonist's right arm, putting another shot out of the question. Indeed, the surgeon said that it would require close attention and most thorough nursing to save his life.

"Tell him I'll stand all costs," gravely uttered Top-Sawyer Sam. "I don't want his life; I'm well satisfied with his right arm!"

Squire Nelson gazed curiously after the River Rex as he slowly moved away from the spot, but he restrained the questions that rose to his lips. In good time he felt confident Cary would take him into his confidence; until then he must wait.

Temporarily bandaging the shattered member, the surgeon had Yellowhammer Jones conveyed to the boat, Top-Sawyer Sam aiding in keeping back the curious crowd of passengers until the wounded gambler was safely in his berth, and the surgeon was making preparations to amputate his arm. And while this was going on, the River Rex, with a select few whom he knew he could trust, acted as guard before the door, keeping back all others, maintaining as much quiet as possible under the circumstances.

And when the shattered member was removed, and the patient recovered consciousness, Top-Sawyer Sam paid him a visit, remaining alone with him for several minutes, during which he spoke earnestly.

He told him all that he had discovered concerning the plot to win the fortune left by Theron Tempest, and said that, knowing how dangerous an enemy a man of his caliber must prove to the real heiress, he had decided to put him temporarily out of the way.

"You can't say you haven't deserved it all, Jones," he added, his voice grave but not unkindly. "You treated me mighty low-down after what I did for you, and I would have been justified in shooting you at sight."

"Better that than this!" moaned the miserable wretch, faintly.

"It's too late to think of that, old fellow. I knew you would give us still more trouble, after last night, and I had to lay you on the shelf. I know now why Boyd Ashby tried so hard to draw me into a row over the table; it was to keep all hands below while you worked a traverse on the pilot!"

There was no reply to this, beyond a low moan of misery.

"I don't ask you to blow on your mates, Yellowhammer, though I'm dead sure you and Ashby haven't gone into it alone. I'll trust to the luck that's pulled me through many another tight place, and if I come out on top in this game, I'll keep an eye on you, for old times' sake. You shan't suffer while I've a dollar to spend. Keep that in mind, and make the best you can out of a mighty bad bargain, old fellow!"

Top-Sawyer Sam hired one of the waiters, with the captain's consent, to act as nurse to the wounded gambler, then went on deck, where he joined Berthine and the squire, who were watching the efforts of the hands to spar the boat off the bar.

Berthine met him with a smile, that told Top-Sawyer Sam, without the knowing wink of her portly escort, that as yet the maiden knew nothing about the duel. This was owing to Nelson, who told her that an accident had occurred to one of the passengers while ashore, and then kept her well apart from such of the lady passengers as were at all likely to divulge the truth.

"Will they soon get the boat afloat?" asked Berthine, with a half-shy glance into the handsome face of the man who, somehow, had strangely interested her from their very first meeting.

It was not love, as yet, though it was a sentiment which might at any moment break forth in full blossom, as the squire mentally decided. The thought made him very uncomfortable as he thought of Mrs. Tempest, of her proud hopes, her wish and expectation that Berthine should form an alliance with one whose veins held blood as pure and blue as those of her own family. A gambler! It was abominable!

Top-Sawyer Sam could give Berthine scant comfort in reply to her questions. The boat had been driven upon the shelving bar with the full force of her mighty engines, working at their best in order to stem the rapid current and make a quick trip. Already the men and the engine-driven spars had done their best for long hours, without stirring the hull, or driving her an inch toward deep water.

"And the river is falling rapidly, as you can see for yourself," as he pointed out a water-

gauge improvised by the captain, thrust into the shallow ahead of the bows.

"Then—why, we may have to stay here for hours."

"If not for days," amended Top-Sawyer Sam, his tones so even, his eyes so bright and dancing that Berthine was almost tempted to think he was really enjoying the situation.

"Then—will we get to St. Louis in time?"

"Certainly we will—we've got to," spluttered the squire, in dread lest Top-Sawyer Sam let something drop that might open the eyes of the maiden, much as he had opened his on that ride to town from Randolph Place.

Stubbornly, doggedly, feeling that it was all labor wasted in vain, yet knowing that each minute but increased the odds against them, work was maintained. The spars were repeatedly replaced when sunken so deep as to give no further purchase. Broken tackle was renewed, and the boat fairly quivered as the engine was driven to its utmost.

But all was in vain, and long before the dinner hour, even the least experienced traveler aboard knew that their chances were divided between two hopes: that the river might rise sufficiently to aid them with the spars, or else the coming of a boat to tow them off.

And it was while at dinner that a wild cheer announced the latter, sending the captain from his seat at the head of the table so unceremoniously that he caught the cloth and dragged it away, leaving ruin and devastation in his path as he rushed headlong from the cabin.

Many of the passengers followed, too deeply interested to think of eating more, and Berthine was among these. Of course she was accompanied by the squire and Top-Sawyer Sam.

And yet there was but little to reward them when they gained the guards: simply a thin line of smoke showing against the sky above the trees that darkened the curve of the river far above their position.

"Still it is a boat, sure enough," laughed Cary, amused by her petulant exclamations. "And in less than an hour, unless she blows up or runs on a snag, she'll be getting ready to give old King Cotton a tug back into floating depth."

Top-Sawyer Sam proved a true prophet in this respect, for in even less time than he named, a boat was seen steaming swiftly around the great bend, promptly answering the distress-signal which King Cotton sent forth. Rapidly she came along with the current, gracefully turning from a direct course and backing her wheels as she drew near, her captain ready to answer the hail which strong lungs sent that way.

"Hard aground and river falling! Lend us a tug, captain!"

"Ay! ay!" came the prompt response, and loud as it was, it was literally drowned and lost in the tumultuous cheer that went up from the passengers on board the King Cotton.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FATE, OR FOUL TREACHERY?

THERE was little time cut to waste by the river-men. Thoroughly versed in their calling, knowing just what to do and how to set about it, there was nothing to say after that hail and prompt response.

Time was valuable to both. The river was steadily falling, and each hour that passed but increased the awkwardness of the "King Cotton's" position on the bar.

Something of this was commented upon by the passengers on the guards of the down-river boat, and sundry witticisms, more or less keen, floated back and forth between the two vessels while the preliminaries were being arranged. It did look odd, to say the least, to see the "King Cotton" lying almost broadside to the current, with nose buried deep in the sands. And it was a situation not so easy to explain, either, at the top of one's voice across the bubbling waves.

Slowly, cautiously, foot by foot, the "River Queen" stole her way up alongside the stranded vessel until her bows lapped its stern, hanging there by the judicious use of her wheels and a shore fast, while the huge hawsers were being got ready for the supreme test which should decide whether or no the "Cotton King" was doomed to lie aground until the rising of the river floated her off again.

All this was so interesting, so fresh and new to Berthine Tempest that she lost all her fears and forebodings. And Top-Sawyer Sam, her little hands clinging to his arm, took particular pleasure in answering all her eager questions. However others might regard that strange grounding, he surely looked upon it as little short of a blessing.

The great spars were freshly planted in front of the buried bows, with donkey-engine barking away at a great rate, and the tackle already strained taut.

The "River Queen" cast off her fasts, dropping slowly back until clear of the stranded boat, carrying with her the ends of the two great hawsers, by means of which, if at all, the vessel was to be set at liberty.

Steam was hissing from the safety-valves, and

nothing remained but to give the signal for united work. A few moments, during which the interested passengers held their breath, braced to meet the anticipated shock—then it came—a shrill scream from the whistle of the "King Cotton."

Instantly all was noise and turmoil. The white steam rushed in loud pantings from the exhausted pipes. The mighty wheels whirled around at full speed, reversed in their action, sending great walls of bubbling foam sweeping against the current, curling past their bows and breaking in white-caps over the shallows beyond like surf on a coral reef.

Every timber in the grounded vessel creaked and groaned, quivering and bending, as it seemed, under the frightful strain. With great hawsers stretched between them, straight and rigid as bars of iron, the "River Queen" tugged to free its fellow, until the dampness, like smoke, went curling and twisting out of the ropes on every side.

All this, yet so well had the dastard hand wrought his work that for minute after minute everything seemed in vain. Doggedly the bows clung to their damp bed, and the excited passengers were beginning to fear they were fated to remain there for all time, when a wild yell rose from the mighty lungs of the mate, who was kneeling at the bows.

"She sucks! She sucks! Cram her wide open, you sleepy devils! Jerk the bolts out and blow off every rivet-head! Wake up and crowd her—crowd her for all she's worth, you—"

Wild and picturesque was his peroration, but not one of the passengers noticed if they heard it. Even they could see that the boat was beginning to yield to this heroic treatment, and that they were fairly in the way of freedom once more.

Piercer barked the 'scape-pipes. More rapidly whirled the great paddles, churning the muddy water into milk-white spray, hurling the crested waves up-river in swift succession, until it seemed as though a cyclone was twisting the surface into chaos.

And then!

Like steam gone mad the two whistles rent the heavens with exultant shrieks and blasts, each pilot vying with the other in producing the most outlandish, diabolical screeches. And the passengers on the two boats lifted their voices in a cheer that drowned even the trained chorus of the lusty deck-hands and roustabouts.

For, leaving a rushing whirlpool where its bows had rested but an instant before, the King Cotton backed down the river, fairly afloat once more!

The River Queen at once cast off the hawsers and sheered out of the way of a possible collision, but the two boats were not to part company soon. There were thanks to be given and information interchanged as to the state of the river above and below, according to rule. And Top-Sawyer Sam, as soon as the vessels lay temporarily tied up at the river-bank, paid a hasty visit to Yellowhammer Jones, then hurried aboard the River Queen.

Without entering into the arguments he used, or the inducements he gave, it is enough to say that Top-Sawyer Sam successfully accomplished his object, and shortly after the crippled gambler was carried from his state-room out of the King Cotton and aboard the River Queen.

"I've made all arrangements for your care and comfort, old fellow," muttered Top-Sawyer Sam, bending over the pale face with something like pity in his own face and voice. "You'll be under the eye of a good surgeon, and he'll see you placed in hospital, where you can receive proper treatment. Don't worry more than you can help, and try to think it might have been even worse."

The wounded gambler was too faint from removal to say much, but there was a marvelously softened light in his blue eyes as they gazed up into the face of the man whose unerring skill had crippled him for life. No hatred now! No vicious longing for revenge!

"Serves me right!" he murmured, with a faint shiver. "I tried to kill you, after—you saved my life! Look out for him—Boyd Ashby!"

His eyes closed and he lay on the pillow like one at the point of death. Top-Sawyer Sam was powerfully tempted to press him to full admission, but dared not run the risk.

"I'd like to know just how many men Ashby's got to help him, but it won't do—it'd shut off his little wind, for keeps!"

He had little time to lose. The boats were whistling, ringing their bells in warning, and with a hasty, cheering farewell to Yellowhammer Jones, Top-Sawyer Sam sprang to the deck, leaping from the rail to the high bank, then hastening aboard his own vessel.

The "River Queen" was the first to turn away from shore, her crew and passengers lustily returning the cheers which poured from the rescued party. The whistles played a salute, then the captain of the "King Cotton" gave his mate the signal to cast all clear.

The big hawser was cast off, the narrow gang-plank drawn in, the good boat turned her nose from shore, once more fairly on her trip

up-river, after a delay shorter far than the most sanguine had dared hope for, when the full truth of the grounding was made known.

"It would be an interesting sight to watch the face of the dastardly scoundrel whose hand dealt that double blow!" muttered Squire Nelson in the ear of Top-Sawyer Sam, as their upward journey was fairly begun. "Do you know, I more than half suspect that fellow you winged had a finger in the pie!"

"If so, don't you reckon he's got his reward?" softly laughed the River Rex, his gray eyes fixed on the hairy face of Daddy McCann.

But little had been heard or seen of "the man from Arkansas" since his fracas with Top-Sawyer Sam, in which he came off so poorly. He had not even entered a protest against the stakes in dispute, which Top-Sawyer Sam had taken possession of immediately after the shock of running aground. And he stolidly declined to notice the covert jests which the passengers cracked at his expense.

His great wish seemed gratified. He had encountered the "broom of the river," and met his master. So, at least, it seemed to those who could see only on the surface of things.

Top-Sawyer Sam felt that the fellow would bear watching, and in a cool, quiet, cautious way he kept an eye on the disguised desperado, trying to discover his confederates, if he had any still remaining aboard.

Comparatively brief though their stay on the bar had been, the constant and heavy work done in trying to get free, had rapidly swept the stock of cordwood away, and there was barely enough remaining to drive the boat up the river to the next wood-landing. This was a full score miles distant, and it was almost dusk when the two vessels parted company, the "River Queen" to out-speed the rapid current, the "King Cotton" to force its way against the muddy flood.

So far as the passengers were concerned, all fell into the usual routine as soon as the upward trip was resumed. Supper was announced by the rumbling gongs, and partaken of with relish. Then, as the night drew on, clear and balmy, the stars filling the heavens, shining brightly in opposition to the moon, more than one couple found themselves slowly promenading the hurricane deck, arm in arm.

Among them were Berthine Tempest and Top-Sawyer Sam, seemingly drawn much closer together by the events of the past hours.

Squire Nelson choked down a groan of uneasiness as he saw how trustingly, how confidently his fair ward leaned on that strong arm.

"Just as though she liked it already," he muttered, pulling nervously at his pendent lip. "And he—confound the audacious rascal! He's going in to win both the girl and the fortune, too!"

He felt in duty bound to interfere, yet he hardly knew how to do so without running the risk of arousing the keen perceptions of his fair ward. If he should do that—he groaned anew at the thought.

"I'd put the cap-sheaf on. She'd freeze to him then—if only for spite. I'll—just shut my eyes and hope for the best."

It was a long and hard pull up against the current, and the stock of wood was growing alarmingly low before the landing was sighted. It was well along in the night, and the majority of the lady passengers were in their berths or preparing to occupy them. Though so reluctant to part with her, Top-Sawyer Sam had escorted Berthine below an hour ago, then returned to his duty, as he considered it.

He felt almost assured that Boyd Ashby would not abandon his fight for the Tempest fortune, and he wanted to keep his eyes open to detect and foil his efforts.

Why did he not guard against this all the more surely by having the disguised schemer placed under lock and key? He could easily enough have brought this about, owing to his being so well known to the officers of the boat; but he took no such steps, for reasons of his own.

The landing was made, and the fire-crates set ablaze to light the roustabouts up and down the double gangway with their loads of dry cordwood. The burly mate, with a voice like that of an angry bull, took his station and kept urging his men to redoubled efforts. And working to a rude, yet pleasing chorus, the perspiring negroes, with cocked grain-sacks protecting heads and shoulders, ran up one plank and trotted down the other, looking only half-human in the red, lurid glare of the fire-crates.

It was a wild, picturesque scene, and interesting even to an old river-man like Top-Sawyer Sam. He leaned over the fore-guards, smoking a cigar, watching the double stream of humanity as the long ranks of cordwood melted away before their attacks. And yet, it may be doubted whether he saw aught of them, save like one in a dream. He was thinking of Berthine Tempest. Wondering if the time would ever come when he would hear her red lips shape the words that now echoed in his heart; if he would ever hear her murmur: *I love you!—I love you!*

Then—a wild, scared scream rung out above the chorus of the trotting roustabouts—the most

terrible alarm that can greet the ear of a traveler on the water:

"Fire! Fire!"

And almost ere the alarm was caught up by others, the lurid flames were leaping up from a huge stack of freight, already threatening the swift destruction of the steamboat.

With maddened leap Top-Sawyer Sam tore through office, Social Hall and cabin to save Berthine Tempest—only to view her struggling in the grasp of another—of Boyd Ashby!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PROVING AN ALIBI.

FEW seconds as had elapsed since the first scream of fire, the wild alarm had already spread throughout the boat, tumbling passengers from their berths with slight regard to appearances; and small marvel.

Frightful experience has shown what complete death-traps each and every river boat is, with its seasoned woodwork, soaked with paint and turpentine; with its light, frail ornaments and carving throughout the cabins and state-rooms, with its inflammable freight piled in vast ranks on either side of the heated boilers.

Women shrieking, men shouting in equal terror, all struggling in a mad, unreasoning flight, impeding each other instead of aiding.

But Top-Sawyer Sam had eyes only for one: only for Berthine, still dressed as though she had not yet retired to her berth, now struggling in the grasp of Boyd Ashby—Daddy McCann as his disguise made him.

"To the guards!" he was shouting, striking savagely with one fist at those who incumbered his passage. "We're cut off from shore! To the guards, if ye want to save your lives!"

Then, with a series of tremendous leaps, Top-Sawyer Sam was close upon him, crying out, venomously:

"Hold, you cur! Give me the lady, or—"

His hard right hand shot out and knocked the disguised schemer endlong, while a deft clutch saved Berthine from sharing his fall. Then:

"Trust to me, my darling!" he uttered, with his lips fairly brushing her pale cheek. "I'll save you, or we'll go down in death together!"

It was strange—almost marvelous. Berthine cast one glance up into his face, then her frantic struggles ceased. She seemed to recover her scattered wits with that one look. She said, clearly:

"I will trust you—I do trust you, wholly, perfectly!"

In that moment Top-Sawyer Sam knew that, come what might, he had won his prize!

But there was no time to reap his reward, just then. Already the mad roaring of the flames rose above all other sounds. Already the heat was growing intense, the suffocating smoke sweeping in a cloud through the long cabins. Even though lying right alongside the bank, their escape might be cut off at any moment!

With one guiding shout to the terrified passengers, Top-Sawyer Sam lifted Berthine from her feet and sprang into a state-room on the side nearest the shore, driving the shuttered door from its hinges with one fierce thrust of his foot, to stagger back as a fiery tongue of flame swept almost into his face!

He caught up a woolen blanket from the berth, wrapping it tightly around the head and shoulders of his loved one, then bowed his head and sprang to the guard-rail, one glance showing him the bank, several feet below the level, and not too far away for what he had in view.

Though the next instant the red flames shot up between him and land, Top-Sawyer Sam had seen enough and did not hesitate a moment. He sprang upon the rail, steadying himself a moment with Berthine lying on one arm and against his shoulder; then he shielded his eyes with his free hand and leaped through the roaring sheet of fire.

An instant of dizzy descent, then he struck the ground, falling on one side, but loyally protecting his precious charge, at his own expense. He scrambled to his feet, bearing Berthine further from the growing heat, then tearing off the protecting blanket, to utter a fervent prayer of praise as he found her safe, uninjured in the least.

One hasty kiss, then he bade her stand aside out of harm's way, while he lent what aid he could to the other passengers.

His warning cry and example had produced good results, for by far the majority of the imperiled passengers had or were gaining shore in much the same manner, though a few were obliged to drop over the rear guards into the water, to escape the rapidly encroaching flames.

Knowing that any attempt to fight the flames and save the boat would be worse than useless, the mate and captain devoted all their efforts to saving human life, leaving the clerks to look after the valuables in the safe and office.

And almost as soon as the frightened creatures touched the water, they were caught by strong hands and passed to shore, so that, so far as could be guessed in such a thrilling moment, not a single life was sacrificed to the roaring demon or its sullen ally, the swirling waves.

It was well that the work was accomplished

so swiftly, for within fifteen minutes from the time the alarm was given, the fasts burned off, and yielding to the current, the blazing mass slowly turned bows from the shore, scraping its stern against the crumbling bank, then floating off down the river, a magnificent, if melancholy spectacle in the night.

Top-Sawyer Sam, wet to the skin, scorched and blackened by fire, at once sought out Berthine when nothing more remained to be done. He found her in company with Squire Nelson, shivering and trembling from sheer excitement, but with eyes glowing vividly as the fiery mass that was reflected in their depths.

"It is terrible, yet glorious!" she breathed, yielding to his hand-clasp, drawing nearer to his side like one who acknowledges a master and a slave, both in one.

This was all unconsciously done, in her great agitation, but Cary felt his heart swelling too great for utterance. He knew that Berthine was hardly conscious of her actions, just then, but he also knew that if love for him had not been born in her heart, she could not have given even this unconscious glimpse of it.

Squire Nelson, only half-clothed and, wholly miserable after the terrible scare, was far more practical than either of his companions just then. And by bustling around, he found that several cabins were hard by, occupied by the owners of the wood-yard, and he at once secured accommodations for Berthine, hurrying her in out of the night air.

Gathered in little knots the men watched the slowly departing vessel, now wrapped in flames from top to keel. In low, half-awed tones they talked, wondering how the fire had started; what would be the result of this second delay; how long they would have to wait for a boat, with the thousand and one other subjects which were naturally suggested by their present situation.

Sam caught sight of Boyd Ashby, his false beard gone with its accompanying wig, and silently approached him, muttering:

"Chuckling over your dastardly work, Boyd Ashby?"

The schemer turned sharply, one hand rising to his bosom as though in quest of a weapon, but as he recognized the speaker the hand dropped to his side, his scowl vanished, his voice came clear and distinct:

"Do you charge me with that, Cary? Better not! I can prove that I was standing by your very side, not one minute before the fire-alarm was given. I can prove that by you yourself!"

"I don't deny it," with a short, hard laugh. "I saw you there. Because you were there, I remained. Shall I tell you why?"

"It is nothing to me," with a slight shrug of the shoulders as he turned again to gaze after the burning vessel.

"I was there because I knew you had not yet given over your hopes of winning the prize for which we are both entered. I was there to see that you gave us no further trouble."

"And you were paid for your trouble, of course!" with a poorly-concealed sneer in his voice. "If necessary, you can swear that I was within arm's length when the alarm of fire broke out!"

"That your body was, I admit; but how about your hands?"

Boyd Ashby turned again, his dark eyes opened widely as he said:

"I don't reckon I follow you, Mr. Cary. Will it be too much trouble for you to speak just a mite plainer?"

"I mean that your brain planned this deed! That your hired tools carried out your devilish plans while you took care to keep within the protection of an *alibi*!" grated Top-Sawyer Sam, his eyes aglow.

Boyd Ashby looked him full in the face for a brief space, then turned away with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You say so. I deny it all. What next?"

"What were you meaning to do with Miss Tempest? To carry her to the guards and hurl her into the river?" sternly demanded the River Rex, a hand closing on the villain's shoulder with crushing power, forcing him to turn about until they once more stood face to face.

"I thought of her when the alarm broke out," was the cold, even response, never flinching from that burning gaze. "You seem to think I am all devil, but even in that moment of horror I thought of her—of my cousin; for even you can't deny that kindred blood flows in our veins!"

"So Cain was close akin to Abel," coldly, cuttingly said Cary.

Boyd Ashby turned a thought paler, but his voice was cold and steady as ever when he added:

"I thought of her, and I tried to save her. I would have saved her at the cost of my own life, if needs be, only for your coming. I knew your voice, and I saw your foul blow coming, but I could not guard myself without letting her fall. Still, I hold no grudge. You saved Berthine, and that cancels all the rest."

Top-Sawyer Sam gazed keenly into his face, trying to read the actual facts there, but it was like searching a blank wall. If Boyd Ashby

was a murderer at heart, there was naught in his looks to show it then.

"Let it go at that, then," with a short, hard laugh as his grasp relaxed. "I'll keep silence—I'll not utter the word that would surely fit a noose about your throat—unless you try another of your foul tricks. Then—I'll forget that the same blood flows in your veins that flows through—"

A wild cry cut short the speech. The burning vessel had vanished save for a few smoking, glowing fragments. The powder in her hold had exploded, rending the great hull to pieces!

Slowly enough the night faded away, and a new day dawned. The passengers were not long in summing up the situation.

There was plenty of room in the several cabins lying hard by, to shelter the ladies and children, while there was no immediate lack of food, palatable if rude and plain.

After all, the case might have been much worse, all things considered, and the day was passed pleasantly ashore, waiting for a coming boat to take them to their journey's end.

Squire Nelson fretted considerably over this second delay, but neither Berthine nor Top-Sawyer Sam seemed ill at ease. Rather the contrary, as the squire uneasily perceived.

Though no words of actual love-making passed between the pair, for as yet Top-Sawyer Sam was afraid to risk all on the cast of a die, it was plain enough to all who cared to take notes, that an intimacy was rapidly growing up between the couple.

They took short strolls through the woodland roads, and Top-Sawyer Sam plucked wild flowers to give his lady-love. They never went far, nor ever quite out of view of one or other of the cabins, for despite their growing happiness, each was expecting the coming of a boat.

Thus the day passed, and night descended, without bringing any signs of a boat from either up or down the river.

"Satan has a finger in it!" growled Squire Nelson, restlessly. "This is the fourth night out, and we're hardly out of sight of Vicksburg as yet! We'll never get to St. Louis in time! Never—no, sir!"

Top-Sawyer Sam uttered a soothing remark, as they turned away from the river-bank to eat supper. He strove to sympathize with his choleric friend, but the soft dreamy smile would come back to his eyes and his lips as he thought of Berthine, of her words, her manner when threatened with a frightful death on board the doomed "King Cotton."

It was late that night—long after the dull lights had been extinguished in the cabins; long after sleep had overtaken a majority of the male passengers—that a glad shout rose from one of the men watching the river for the first signs of a coming steamer.

"A boat! a boat—and upward bound, too!" was the joyous cry.

Top-Sawyer Sam sprung to the river-bank to make sure; but only a glance was needed. The red lights of a steamboat were surely visible as she swung up around the curve in the river below!

"Go waken Miss Tempest, squire," he hurriedly cried, as he shook the old gentleman by the shoulder as he yawned and stared stupidly around. "A boat is coming, and we'll get there even yet!"

But, a few minutes later he found the squire all atremble, saying:

"She's gone! I can't find her anywhere!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

ANOTHER DASTARDLY DEED.

FOR a single breath Top-Sawyer Sam stood like one suddenly petrified, staring into the pale, frightened countenance of the old gentleman who brought such ill-tidings.

"I've called and searched—I've asked everybody I met, but no one can tell me anything about her," gasped the squire, brokenly, looking and acting like one who has given over all hopes.

Still bewildered, Top-Sawyer Sam stared about him as though he expected to catch sight of the maiden amid the hurrying, excited crowd as they gathered to watch the coming of the impatiently longed-for steamboat. And then, as he caught sight of Boyd Ashby hard by, a hoarse, choking cry escaped his bloodless lips, and before the schemer could draw a weapon or lift a hand to defend himself, the River Rex was upon him, seemingly gifted with superhuman strength.

Boyd Ashby uttered one choking cry of mingled rage and terror as the River Sport twisted him from his feet, heaving him above his head, then hurling him to the ground as though he meant to shatter every bone in his evil carcass!

Fortunately for the villain the ground was soft and sandy where he fell, though the breath was well-nigh driven out of his body by the tremendous shock. Then Top-Sawyer knelt beside him, his hands closed about his windpipe with a vicious force as he snarled:

"Tell me what you have done with her! Tell me where you have taken her, you devil, or I'll strangle you surer than the noose of a hangman!"

There was no reply, for that terrible grip cut off all chance of breathing, much less uttering the speech demanded. And, only for the crowd of startled passengers falling upon the maddened gambler, tearing him from his prey, Boyd Ashby would never have drawn the breath of life again.

For a few seconds Sam fought like a demon against the crowd, though his limbs were too heavily hampered for him to work them any injury; then he suddenly grew calm, once more himself.

Only when satisfied of this, would his cantors permit him to go free, but they were justified in so doing. That fit of insanity—for it was little less—had worn itself out, and Top-Sawyer Sam was cool and composed as though it had never taken possession of him, mind and body.

By this time Boyd Ashby was able to stand upon his feet, and though he showed traces of the terrible ordeal, he was almost himself again, and made no effort to avoid the River King when the latter sought him.

"I'm glad I didn't strangle the life quite out of you, Boyd Ashby," coldly uttered the Rex, his gray eyes glowing living coals. "If you have no hand in this vanishment, I have no right to cheat the hangman, in your case. If you have caused her abduction—such a death is a thousand times too sudden and merciful for you!"

"I don't know what you mean," was the slow, measured retort. "I have kidnapped no one. I was sleeping snugly—sharing the market of this gentleman—when the cry of the coming boat awakened me. Then—the next I knew you had me foul."

"It is true, Mr. Cary," earnestly uttered the passenger pointed out by Ashby as having shared his rude couch. "I can swear to all that. I can take oath that the gentleman never left my side until the boat was announced as coming in sight."

"You are good at *alibis*," with a hard, grim smile that sent an involuntary shiver over more than one of those who caught it by the hastily kindled bonfires. "Run your rope yet a little longer. But, bear this in mind: if I find you had a hand in this last outrage, I'll hunt you down to worse than death, without regard to the blood that flows in your veins!"

In company with Squire Nelson and others of the passengers, immediate search was made for the missing maiden, but little that was at all satisfactory could be ascertained.

Several of the female passengers remembered having seen her in the room common to them, when the lights were extinguished for the night, but that was all. None remembered having seen or heard her since that hour. None had been aroused or disturbed by unusual sounds during that portion of the night which elapsed before the coming of the steamboat roused all from slumber.

By this time the boat had reached the wood-yard, coming to a mooring, both for supply of wood and in answer to the signals displayed.

"You attend to that," Top-Sawyer Sam said to the squire, who had partially recovered from the great shock given him by this mysterious disappearance. "Make an agreement with the captain to hold his boat until we are ready, even though you have to buy the old tub outright!"

With wonderful coolness and decision Top-Sawyer Sam fell to work. It seemed as though that brief spell of savage rage which came so near to ending the career of Boyd Ashby, had both cleared his brain and lent his wits double sharpness.

Five minutes sufficed to assure him that Berthine Tempest was not within range of his voice, and then he knew the worst; she had been abducted by Boyd Ashby or some of his hired tools!

Quickly selecting a number of men on whose intelligent co-operation he knew he could rely, he sent them to gather the passengers together, marching them along in single file between himself and the clerk of the burned boat, who held the register containing the name of every passenger. As each one passed, he or she was checked, until the last one was recognized. Then—

"I find three names unaccounted for. One was transferred to the River Queen. The others—where are they?" demanded the clerk, closing his book with a sharp clap that pointed his question.

There was a brief silence, broken by a tall, stoop-shouldered, gaunt fellow in rough, homemade garments, John Tinker by name, the man after whom "Tinker's Landing" was called, and the chief owner of the wood-yard.

"Mebbe it ain't my put, gen'l'men, but I've bin sorter takin' count as the crowd passed by, an' I reckon I kin describe them same two missin' critters. An' I know one of 'em—Hump Majors I used to know him called—ain't none too good fer to steal a lady if they was a dollar to be seed at the turnin' o' the trick!"

Sam turned toward Boyd Ashby at this, a vengeful glow in his gray eyes that turned them almost red as he muttered:

"The rascal you hired to run off Uncle Zero! Look out for your throat, Boyd Ashby! It's narrowing down mighty close to your door! I'd send you up a tree this minute if I could be sure

Miss Tempest had suffered no worse than abduction! As it is—hide your head as you may, I'll run you down and pay you off in full as soon as I find the lady!"

Boyd Ashby tried to laugh, but it was a sickly effort. Many of the crowd caught the stern warning, and shrunk away from his side as they might from one with some loathsome disease. Fortunately it was for him that just then the steamboat drew up to the rude landing-place.

Then it was that Top-Sawyer bade Squire Nelson look to securing the promise of the captain to hold his boat for their return, while he resumed the seemingly hopeless quest. Where should he look? In what quarter turn for some guiding clew?

"I don't reckon they went so fur as *that*, stranger," muttered John Tinker, as the River King cast a glance at the river. "Ef they hed chucked her into the drink, why wouldn't they be 'round yer' to play know-nothin'? What would they cut stick fer?"

"He may have feared recognition—this Hump Majors, as you call him," suggested Sam, yet with a freshening gleam of hope to be read in his gray eyes.

"Mebbe so, but I'm layin' my good money that when we find Hump Majors an' Joe Peters, we'll find the gal," positively nodded Tinker.

"We'll find them—if they are above ground!" with stern emphasis. "They *must* have left some clew behind them."

"Ef they hain't, they've left what'll sarve our pu'ppus' jes' as well, stranger," grinned John Tinker, as he slipped a horny hand through the gambler's arm, leading him toward a low, rude structure some little distance down the river. "That Hump Majors is so durned fat an' greasy that he'll leave a scent strong enough for a keen nose to lift any time inside a week—an' I reckon I've got the noses, too! Bet I hev!"

As his hand rattled the chain and padlock securing the low door, a deep, warning growl came from within, and Top Sawyer Sam uttered a cry of grim delight as he read the secret aright.

"Bloodhounds! Strange that I never noticed this place!"

Tinker grinned, but said nothing. He knew that the River King had had other and pleasanter matters to keep him busy since the landing.

"It ain't everybody that I show the critters to," he laughed, as he braced himself to receive the fawning leap of the two huge animals. "I fetched 'em up here to run down a couple o' niggers that tuck leg-bail, an' they done the work so mighty slick that I reckoned I'd best hang on to 'em fer futur' needs. I'm monstrous glad I done it, now! An' ef we don't run them dirty cusses down in a hurry, I'll eat my ole boots!"

"Find them—save her—and I'll fill both boots with gold!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"THE GAME IS LOST."

WHILE John Tinker took the bloodhounds and searched for the trail of the kidnappers, Top-Sawyer Sam hastened to find the squire and tell him of this lucky turn in their affairs.

Squire Nelson listened eagerly, his worn and haggard face resuming something of its wonted color as he saw how greatly their chances of success were increased by this fact.

"I've seen the captain, and though he said he was mightily pressed for time, I've arranged with him to hold over until we come back. Never mind what it will cost—that's my lookout!"

They sought out John Tinker, who was just a trifle crestfallen at first, because his canine pets had failed to promptly strike off the trail, though he had an explanation ready at his tongue's end:

"I never tuck a thought, ye see, gen'l'men," with an embarrassed air that would have been amusing under less serious circumstances. "I knowed the pups could foller any trail, ef once they was fairly set onto it; but though they've hit off plenty o' scent, how's they to know which is the 'dential one we want most?"

"We'll have to wait until daylight, then," frowned Top-Sawyer Sam.

"Ef we could git a bit o' rag, or anythin' the two dirty critters hed teched—but how's that to be done?" muttered Tinker, with a gloomy shake of his shaggy pow.

And so, after all, it was full daylight before the first clew was struck. This Top-Sawyer Sam furnished, in a handkerchief which bore the initials of the missing maiden, and which he found near the rear of the house which she had occupied until kidnapped. And with this as a guide the noble hounds slowly lifted the scent until they came to a point where two small footprints were plainly to be distinguished, together with larger tracks on either side.

While Tinker was thus engaged, Top-Sawyer Sam was having an argument with Squire Nelson. The old gentleman stubbornly asserted his intention of joining in the quest against Cary's better judgment.

"It's all arranged with the captain. He's agreed to hold the boat for us, and he'll do it without me at his elbow. Let Mr. Mobbs stay

to keep him to the bargain, if you like; but as for me, I'm going to help find the poor darling! I couldn't look her mother in the face again if I faltered now."

There was no reasoning him out of this purpose, and Top-Sawyer Sam quickly gave over the attempt, turning his energies to procuring horses for the party, consisting of John Tinker and themselves. This was not difficult to do, and when Tinker gave the exultant signal that the hunt was fairly opened they were in readiness to follow the bloodhounds.

However interesting such a hunt might be to those who played a part in it, with so much at stake, a close record would furnish but dry reading. The trail led through a tangled bit of swampy ground, then struck a rude trail, rather than road, where the kidnappers could make better time through the night. This, again, led into a more traveled road, lying several miles back from the river, where the scent lay less keen in the dry dust.

Then the trail seemed to be lost, irretrievably!

For hours Tinker and his hounds tried to work out the puzzle, only to leave it a greater enigma than before, and it was not until nearly dusk that the riddle was solved.

It came about through Top-Sawyer Sam making a foray away from the main road, in quest of provisions. He came upon a house where none but women were visible, and from them he learned that two horses had been stolen the night before, or early in the morning. The men, with their neighbors, had started out in search of the missing animals, vowing to hang the thieves if caught.

Without stopping for the food, and not a little to the alarm of the women, Sam wheeled his horse and rode at full speed back to the road, where Tinker was still puzzling over the vanished scent.

"Durned fool that I didn't think o' that!" snorted Tinker, in utter disgust at his own stupidity when Top-Sawyer told his suspicions.

Half an hour later they were circling the hounds around the lot from which the horses had been stolen, and were gratified by a deep, musical note within a few minutes.

"They've ketched it!" yelled Tinker, in high glee. "That's whar the cusses put the gal while they lifted the critters! Now we'll run 'em down, sure as fate!"

Meanwhile Top-Sawyer Sam, with some little difficulty, reassured the women, and procured an ample supply of provisions and drink, promising to restore the stolen animals if they were run down.

Throughout that night the trail was kept, though the darkness forced Tinker to put his hounds in leashes, lest they be lost to sight; for they ran mute until the trail got warm.

Even when dawn came, the little party kept going, worn and haggard, but feeling that there was far too much at stake for thought of rest while they could keep in motion.

Though it was all Greek to our friends, Tinker confidently declared that the trail was rapidly freshening, and proved his words soon after noon, by showing them where the kidnappers had spent the greater portion of the night with their captive.

A brief pause here, then the hunt was resumed.

Nothing of importance occurred until nearly nightfall, when it was discovered that the thieves had abandoned the stolen stock, to push into a swampy tract on foot, forcing their captive to walk between them, in Indian file. Then—

The hounds leaped forward with a mellow bay, rearing with forefeet against a rude log cabin, the door of which was closed and fastened by a heavy log being braced against it from the outside.

"Look out, boss!" warningly cried Tinker as Top-Sawyer Sam rushed forward, hurling the log aside as though it weighed no more than a bent straw, tearing the door open and leaping into the darkness with a glad cry—that was mingled with a sobbing scream of fear, turned to joy!

"He's ketched her, or I'm a howlin' liar!" yelled Tinker, fastening upon his hounds, hugging them as though they were his children.

There were none to laugh over his rude antics, however. Top-Sawyer Sam held Berthine in his arms, kissing her lips, her cheeks, her eyes. And Squire Nelson, laughing and crying at the same time, hugged them both in one mighty embrace, his gouty feet rattling merrily upon the rude puncheon floor as though he was trying to dance a hornpipe.

It was nearly an hour later before the little party could settle down to anything like sober talk. Then, by the light of the great fire which John Tinker kindled in the damp fireplace, Berthine told the tale of her abduction.

It was not a pleasant subject, though she had not been abused by her captors, save in being stolen away and forced to make a long and fatiguing journey, with very little chance for rest by the way. And for this reason, Berthine made a short story of her adventures.

She only knew that she was awakened soon after lying down in company with other lady pas-

sengers in Tinker's house, by having a heavy shawl or blanket clapped over her face and twisted tight about her shoulders. The lack of breath and fright combined quickly caused her senses to reel, though she was dimly conscious of being borne away in strong arms, not to feel her feet again until in the dark, lonely woods.

It was here that Tinker had first been convinced that he was following the right trail, and at that point the chase might be said to have begun.

She told how her captors, rude, rough villainous fellows, told her that unless she forced them to use harsh means by her own willfulness, they would do her no harm beyond holding her for a ransom. And then, for the first time she recognized Hump Majors, as being one of the two ruffians who had before attempted her abduction.

"I knew, then, that Boyd Ashby was at the bottom of it all," she added, with a wan smile. "But I was afraid to let the rascal know I had recognized him, lest he be driven to kill me in self-protection."

She told of the horse-stealing exploit, and said that the two men, evidently fearing pursuit, abandoned the animals to take to the swamp, where they first fed and then left her bound hand and foot.

"They promised to return and set me free when their end was gained, but that gave me little hope. I never expected to escape. I was in the lowest depths of despair when I heard you coming. And even then I feared it was my captors returning, for some terrible purpose. Instead—I thought an angel of light had burst open my prison door."

There was a faint, shy laugh accompanying these words, that sent a flash of joy through the River Rex. He believed he knew what she meant by that; he believed that, in that instant when she recognized his face and figure, a deep and earnest love was born in her maiden heart.

He could only press her hand, and let his great eyes speak to hers, just then. With Squire Nelson half-embracing her, there was hardly room for other demonstration.

With the first ray of light, a cold bite was eaten, and the journey back was begun, all parties being in high spirits, and John Tinker not the least joyous of the quartet. Did they not owe all this bliss to his noble pups?

It was nearly noon when they came suddenly upon an awful spectacle by the roadside; two human bodies suspended by the neck from a stout limb, with frightfully distorted features, and on the breast of each a rudely lettered placard containing the one word "horse-thieves!"

With a shudder Berthine rode by, her face averted, not even looking back at a sharp cry from John Tinker, drawn forth by the curious actions of his "pups."

They gave a deep, angry bay, leaping up and fastening upon the dead bodies, hanging on until their master tore them away.

"They thought it was the right way to eend the trail, I reckon, he muttered, apologetically as he overtook the others. "Waal, I al'ays told Hump he'd pull hemp if he kep' a-goin'!"

The explanation was clear enough to all. Though they had abandoned their stolen horses, Hump Majors and his fellow-thief had been captured by the impromptu Vigilance Committee, tried, found guilty and hung out of band.

"Served him right!" muttered Top-Sawyer Sam, with a backward glance at the ghastly figures, still swaying under the impulse lent them by the hounds. "But I'm mighty sorry she had to see 'em!"

Little worthy especial mention occurred to the party on their backward journey, and though their animals were pretty well jaded, by taking the most direct route, guided by John Tinker, they managed to reach the landing shortly after the falling of night.

For some little time Squire Nelson had been growing more and more uneasy as he vainly listened for some sound to guide his wishes. And then—as they suddenly came out on the river-bank a few rods above the spot where they had left the steamboat moored, to see naught but vacancy, a wild, angry, despairing cry rose in his throat.

For there was no boat to be seen!

"Gone! Left us behind! Then—the game is surely lost!"

With utter wretchedness came these words, but then, quickly recovering from the stupefaction which had fallen over him, the squire rode rapidly to the very landing as though still disbelieving the evidence of his own senses.

Berthine looked very pale in the first rays of the moon, but Top-Sawyer Sam smiled gloriously, triumphantly as he leaned over and stole an arm about her lithe waist, his lips almost brushing her cheek as he gently breathed:

"You have lost, but I—may I hope I have won? My precious love?"

If there was a reply, no ears save theirs caught it; if a response to his ardent kiss, none save they were aware of it.

Farrington Mobbs, haggard, woebegone, his voice husky and uncertain, was telling the others how it all came about.

"He did it—Boyd Ashby! He offered the captain double your pay, and when you didn't come back, he carried the day—curse him!"

Squire Nelson groaned hollowly, the picture of dejection.

"Only four more days to make it! And who can say when a boat will come! No use! The game is lost!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IN THE GLAD HOUR.

In those days of water communication solely, the levee of St. Louis presented a far different appearance from what it does now, when the arrival or departure of a steamboat is a matter of interest and curiosity to many. Then this was, practically speaking, the end of up-river navigation. Of course many boats passed on up the Mississippi, and a lesser number bound for the Missouri, but they were for the most part smaller craft, and played but an insignificant part in the shipping business which formed a substantial basis for the boasts of the Queen City.

The steep levee, paved with heavy stone blocks set on edge, was crowded with freight, from or for the steamboats which crowded the landing, in places two and three deep. Gangs of lusty roustabouts, carrying burdens sufficient to stall an ox, were rushing in lines down the levee like laden ants homeward bound. Bull-voiced mates were cursing and threatening, cheering or—in rare cases—expostulating with their gangs. Steam was escaping, bells jangling, paddle-wheels thrashing the muddy water as a boat strove to alter her position; to crowd into a narrow opening to the levee, or back out to begin her trip down or up the river.

Yet all was not hurry and skurry on the levee. Back in the shade cast by one of the big, gloomy, damp-looking red warehouses, forming a sort of division between the narrow levee and the steep hill which had to be climbed before anything like a partial view of the Mound City could be obtained, a neatly-dressed, stylish-looking young man was standing, with flashing eyes fixed on a steamboat just coming to a pause on the opposite side of another vessel belonging to the same line.

On the front guards, near and partly concealed from his gaze by the immense smokestacks, stood a little group of passengers, ready and evidently anxious to land. And as he gazed, the young man gave a low, triumphant laugh as the words came muttering across his teeth:

"Long looked for, come at last! And much good may it do you, my very dear friends! I kiss my hand to you, charming cousin! I offer my throat to your grip once more, Top-Sawyer Sam! May you only attempt to improve the opportunity!"

Boyd Ashby turned his evil gaze from the waiting passengers, and made a rapid signal. Half a dozen men seemed to start into motion at the same moment, passing him by, one after another, each one receiving much the same muttered warning:

"Our birds have come. All eyes open, and if there's any trouble, see that you make clean work of that tall devil standing by the lady with a scarlet feather in her bonnet!"

Keen though the eyes of Boyd Ashby, sharpened by hate and a lust for vengeance, they were matched by others just as penetrating and all seeing on board the Ivanhoe.

Top-Sawyer Sam recognized the schemer, and called the attention of his companions to him, a cold smile curling his lips as he read aright the meaning of that close watch.

Berthine turned pale. Farrington Mobbs shivered and glanced hurriedly about as though thinking of hunting a hiding-place. Squire Nelson frowned darkly and muttered doggedly to the River Rex:

"Say what you like, I'll get even with the atrocious villain! I'll lay him by the heels, if there is even the ghost of law in St. Louis!"

"Do not notice him—do not permit him to draw you into a quarrel—for my sake," murmured Berthine, with her eyes on the squire, but her little hand telling Top-Sawyer Sam that her appeal was meant to include him as well.

The River Rex laughed softly as he saw the rough, slouching figures passing in slow procession before their prime enemy.

"Boyd Ashby seems to have thought of that, too, judging by his gang of heelers. But business before pleasure, always. We'll let him have full swing until after we pay Tremont Parrish a visit. Then—"

The boat was made fast and there was an eager rush of passengers to land. Top-Sawyer Sam escorted Berthine safely down the broad steps to the lower deck, then across to the other boat, from thence to the stone-paved levee. Here he deftly transferred her to the arm of Squire Nelson, preferring to have both hands at liberty since they were forced to pass directly by where Boyd Ashby stood, backed by his little gang of "heelers."

There was a poorly-disguised smile of triumph on his dark face as he lifted his hat with a low bow to his cousin, who coldly ignored the salutation. A hot flush leaped into his face, but he had laid out his course and stuck to it closely.

"Good-morning, Squire Nelson, and you, Mr. Cary; welcome to town!" he said, blandly, as though they had parted on the best of terms.

"If you are seeking any particular person or locality permit me to offer my services."

Squire Nelson responded only by an indignant stare, but Top-Sawyer Sam coolly responded:

"You are too kind, my dear Ashby. Nothing would delight us more than to make use of your services, but we're just going to pay Tremont Parrish a call; you may have heard of him?"

"The lawyer who had charge of the Theron Tempest property, you mean?" drawled Ashby, with a smile that showed his teeth. "I know him passing well—after a business fashion, of course. Indeed, I was on the point of paying him a call this very hour. I will be happy to act as your guide, if—"

"Too much honor, my dear fellow," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, coolly glancing over the little gang of thugs who had drawn closer during this brief interchange, their hands in pockets, as though on weapons. "It would be a pity to draw you from your bosom companions; and such an escort would cause those who saw us to make a hurried rush ahead to the recorder's court to make sure of seats. As a salve—drink that to our health, will you?"

Top-Sawyer Sam tossed a coin toward the flushing schemer, then turned on his heel and strode after his friends.

"Shell we slug 'im, boss?" growled one of the thugs, viciously.

"No!" snapped Ashby, signaling a hack that turned from a side street into view. "Hurry to Parrish's office, and hold yourselves ready in case of a row, but not another move unless I bid you!"

Sam had no difficulty in guiding his friends to the office occupied by the lawyer of whom they were in search, but even he was surprised when the office door opened and they were ushered into the presence of Boyd Ashby as well as Mr. Parrish.

The arch-plotter was cool and even impudent in his hour of triumph, though he carried himself so that there was no actual excuse for punishing him by purely physical means.

With a polite effusion he rose from his seat, greeting the little company by name, even to Farrington Mobbs, whom he included in the introduction which followed, greatly to the annoyance of Tremont Parrish.

"I am happy to meet you, Miss Tempest," with a bow, "and you, gentlemen," to Squire Nelson and Top-Sawyer Sam. "But as for you," with an angry frown upon the cowering, shivering, trembling Farrington Mobbs, "you infernal scoundrel! I'll kick you endlong out of the house unless you skulk away of your own accord!"

But Sam deftly interposed his athletic figure between the irate lawyer and his former clerk, smiling blandly, but with a meaning that was not lost on the angry gentleman as he said:

"I wouldn't go quite that far, Mr. Parrish. For if you begin to kick, you'll have to carry it through; and I'm hardly used to such invitations to vacate. Mr. Mobbs came at my pressing invitation. And I reckon he'll remain until I give him leave to depart."

Parrish fell back, mumbling something about the presence of a lady, but Top-Sawyer cut him short, abruptly opening the matter which had brought them to his office.

"You drew up a will for a client named Theron Tempest, some two years ago, I believe, Mr. Parrish? In that will was mentioned—"

"That affair has come to an end," curtly interposed the lawyer, with a half-exultant gleam in his little eyes. "Theron Tempest died on April 3d, 185—, just two years and three days ago. That bars out all claims save the one advanced, with ample proofs, by the gentleman who did me the honor of mentioning your names: Boyd Ashby, Esquire!"

"At your service, dear cousin!" blandly uttered that worthy, rising from his seat and bowing low, his swart face lit up with a glow of almost vicious triumph.

Unable to contain his rage longer, Squire Nelson burst forth, scoring the smiling trickster severely, charging him with his crimes, both proved and suspected. Smilingly Sam stood, one hand lending Berthine courage, his other ready for use in case Ashby should grow infuriated by the torrent which the choleric old gentleman was discharging upon his head. But there was no need of that precaution. The villain was too well satisfied with his victory to feel even a prick of conscience just then.

"This is simply abominable—simply outrageous, sir!" frowned Parrish, as the squire ceased for lack of breath. "What have I to do with all this? Bring your complaint before the Recorder, if you wish, but you must control your temper in my office, or depart!"

"This lady is the sole surviving child of Noble Tempest, brother to Theron Tempest, and the rightful heiress to his fortune, under the terms of his will," quietly stated Top-Sawyer Sam.

"Pity that she delayed her coming so long," bowed Parrish, coldly. "The two years expired at midnight of the 3d. This is the 6th."

"And I have entered my claim, with proofs of my identity, just two days ago," laughed Ashby, triumph in every line of his swarthy face.

"We'll break the will," began Nelson, to be checked by Sam Cary.

"There are good grounds for a contest, beyond a doubt, but perhaps we can come to an amicable agreement without that," turning to Ashby as he added: "No person knows better how valid this young lady's claim should be than you, Ashby. You say you have won the fight. The fortune is an enormous one; more than any one person can require. Will you not come to some friendly agreement? Will you not share this fortune with your cousin, Miss Tempest?"

Ashby sprang to his feet with a low, hard laugh, then said:

"On one condition: I love you, Berthine Tempest—love you madly, insanely! Swear that you will become my wife, and half the fortune left by Theron Tempest shall be signed over to you!"

"I decline!" coldly replied the maiden, her dark eyes flashing with mingled indignation and scorn. "I would sooner beg my bread from door to door than accept a penny from your crime-stained hands!"

"So be it, then!" with a vicious ring in his voice. "You may starve for all of me—for all of the riches left by Uncle Theron!"

Sam Cary quietly put an arm about her indignation-shaken form, a glorious smile upon his face as he said:

"I hardly think she need fear starvation so long as I am able to do a day's work. Never heed the rascal, Berthine. If you have lost a fortune, you have gained a husband."

Although he must have known something of this, from the manner in which Berthine looked to Cary for support, as well as the protecting yet tender manner in which the River King regarded her, yet this announcement came like a thunder-clap upon the schemer. He turned ghastly pale, and forgetting his own peril, thinking only how he might revenge himself upon this proud woman whom he had learned to love so madly, so hopelessly, and who so bitterly scorned him, he cried:

"A glorious destiny, to be sure! The wife of a gambler! The bride of a man who trusts to his nimble fingers and skill in cheating to keep the wolf from the door! Truly, my cousin, I congratulate you!"

Sam laughed aloud, as though he listened to a good jest. Then, blandly, he remarked:

"Go slow, Boyd Ashby. It's an ill-bird that fouls its own nest."

"What do you mean by that?" snarled the triumphant schemer.

"Simply—that I am your elder brother, my dear fellow!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CLAIMING HIS OWN.

"You lie!" hoarsely shouted Ashby. "Joel Archer is dead!"

Cold and stern Sam stood before the schemer, a pair of gleaming hand-cuffs dangling in full sight as he uttered:

"Choose your words a little more carefully, brother, and remember that there is a lady present. For her sake I spare you this far; but break out in a similar strain, and I'll not only clap the irons on you, but turn you over to the authorities on charge of murder!"

Bewildered, stupefied, Ashby sunk back in his chair, trembling like a leaf, ghastly pale, with eyes that glared upon the speaker as though they beheld a ghost or one risen from the dead.

Cold, composed, Top-Sawyer Sam turned to the astonished lawyer.

"Will you be so obliging as to recall the express terms in which Theron Tempest laid down his wishes, Mr. Parrish? Of course you will expect an interview with my lawyer, but it can do no harm for us to come to a more definite understanding just now."

"Am I to understand—"

"That I claim to fall heir to the Tempest fortune, since Miss Tempest failed to put forward her claim within the period of grace granted by Theron Tempest—yes," bowed Top-Sawyer Sam.

"But Boyd Ashby—"

"Must stand aside in my favor," was the curt interjection. "He is the son of Drusilla Tempest, it is true, but only by her second marriage. I am the son of Drusilla Tempest, by her first husband, Thurston Archer. Boyd Ashby, therefore, is my half-brother, and until I die he has not even the ghost of a claim to the fortune!"

"I can claim one-half, anyway," gasped the thoroughly astounded man, catching at a ray of hope through the darkness which had overwhelmed him in the very hour of his triumph.

"Unless I have forgotten the terms of the will, you cannot claim one penny," declared Top-Sawyer Sam. "You can decide this point, Mr. Parrish. You drew up the will. No doubt you still have possession of it, or at least a copy?"

"I remember—it is as you say—if you are really an elder son!" mechanically muttered the bewildered lawyer, scarce knowing what words passed his lips, the surprise was so complete.

"That will suffice for the present," bowed Sam, nothing loth to cut the interview short, now that his main end was accomplished. "I will send my legal adviser to confer with you. He will bring all documents and proofs necessary to support my claims and substantiate my identity. Until then, please bear in mind that I hold you responsible for every dollar and dollar's worth of the property in dispute!"

Without even a glance toward Ashby, who lay rather than sat in his chair, the very picture of stupid hopelessness, Sam Cary drew Berthine's trembling hand through his arm, and left the office.

Unable to realize what had happened, Squire Nelson followed, with Farrington Mobbs, even more utterly crushed, shuffling along at his heels.

Three persons were seated at a cosy supper in a private parlor of the Planters' House, that evening. But appetizing though the viands were they passed almost wholly untasted.

"It's nonsense, I tell you, man!" suddenly spluttered Squire Nelson, as he flung his crumpled napkin across the room and pushed back his plate. *I can't eat!* And if you don't tell us all about it, right off the reel, I'll—I'll commit suicide—by bursting through excess of wonder and curiosity and amazement and—good Lord!"

"Haven't we been tantalized enough, dear Sam?" murmured Berthine, one little hand coaxingly patting the sleeve of the handsome, laughing River Sport.

"Joel, my dear," with a mock assumption of dignity that was flatly belied by his laughing eyes. Joel Archer, Esquire! Top-Sawyer Sam, or simply Sam Cary is well enough for a river sport—a gambler, as our loving cousin and half-brother sweetly termed me—but for the heir to the tremendous Tempest fortune!"

"Tell us all, or I'll tell Birdie how you—confound you, boy!" with angry impatience, yet laughing heartily: "I begin to believe that you had a finger in grounding the boat, and in stealing Berthine away so we'd lose the prize by missing connection!"

"When I had it won, already?" laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, with an audacious glance into the blushing face so near his shoulder. "When all I had to do was to marry the heiress?"

But time presses and space runs scant. It was all very delightful to them, no doubt, this gay badinage, but the story Top-Sawyer Sam—how familiarly the old title will assert itself!—would consume too much time if detailed just as he told it to his eager, interested audience.

Drusilla Tempest married twice. Her first husband died early, leaving her one child, he whom we have known as Top Sawyer Sam. When he was only a child, she married again, with Temple Ashby, who survived her only a few years, leaving one child, also a son.

But long before this, Temple Ashby, by his harsh treatment and growing hatred, drove Joel Archer away from home. The high-spirited lad would not bow the knee to him, and to escape a really brutal taskmaster, he ran away from home. He was still young, and learning that his step-father was making hot search for him, he cunningly manufactured evidence that convinced Temple Ashby of his death by drowning in the river.

Shortly afterward he learned of his mother's death, and as this removed his last filial tie, he retained the name he had assumed, of Samuel Cary, and eventually became known as Top-Sawyer Sam, the River Sport.

He learned of the will left by Theron Tempest, and through a lawyer gained full knowledge of its conditions. He made no sign, feeling not the slightest interest in his uncle, Noble Tempest, of whom, indeed, he retained no recollection, if they had ever met. Knowing that he would fall heir, failing the elder branch, he quietly collected all proofs necessary to show his identity, then let the matter drift.

He knew Boyd Ashby by sight and reputation, but had never made himself known as a relative. And until the partial confession made by Farrington Mobbs aboard the Old Hickory, when in fear of his life, Top-Sawyer Sam was ignorant that he had a cousin Berthine living. As for what followed, it is hardly necessary to recall that now; the reader can turn backward in mind and see all that is essential.

"There is a clause in the will which helped me feel confident of winning in the end," he added, smilingly. "Uncle Theron expressly stated that his fortune was, if possible, to remain intact. If his sister Drusilla was dead, her eldest child was to have everything, on condition that he or she assumed the Tempest name. This, of course, cuts Boyd off without a dollar other than I see fit to allow him."

"Give him a rope, and beg him to go hang himself!" exploded Squire Nelson, impetuously. "He's not fit to live and cumber the earth!"

"He's hardly a model, I'm free to own," laughed Top-Sawyer Sam, though there was a grave light gradually deepening in his eyes as he added: "And yet—say what you will, blood is thicker than water! If it hadn't been—I would have killed Boyd long ago!"

"Do not talk of him," murmured Berthine,

her bright color fading perceptibly. "Even now it sends a cold thrill over me just to hear his name uttered!"

Was it a premonition? Was it the shadow of death's wings that led Berthine Tempest to speak those shivering words?

For, near as they could calculate afterward, at the moment she thus spoke, Boyd Ashby died!

He never rallied from the crushing blow administered just when his fierce, vindictive triumph was strongest. Tremont Parrish, becoming alarmed, called a hack and had him conveyed to a hospital. All care was bestowed upon him, but without avail. He sunk rapidly, never speaking a word after being placed on the cot, dying without a struggle.

Joel Archer—our "Top-Sawyer Sam"—had no difficulty in making his claims good, and before the week was out Tremont Parrish formally resigned his trust into the hands of the rightful heir.

Then came an answer to the letter which Squire Nelson had written Mrs. Tempest, frankly telling her all that had transpired since their departure from Randolph Place. In that letter was a cordial invitation to Joel Archer to visit the Place, with a graceful intimation that he was expected to see his cousin safely home again.

Farrington Mobbs was amply recompensed for all the trouble and tribulations he had undergone, though his schemings and plottings had really wrought but little save in bringing the cousins together.

"And doesn't that deserve a rich reward, dear Joel?" murmured Berthine, her dark eyes filled with proud, happy love as they met the honest gray orbs of the River Sport.

"Were I to pay him in full for the great happiness his eavesdropping has brought me, little woman, I would indeed have to battle with the wolf at our door," laughingly, yet very earnestly replied Archer.

There is little more to add before drawing the curtain.

With all money matters satisfactorily arranged, our friends took a boat for down-river, having a quick and uneventful trip, in strong contrast to the one which we have so closely followed.

Top-Sawyer Sam—we like that name best of all—met a warm welcome at the hands of Mrs. Tempest, and before the little party broke up that night, the day for Berthine to change her name from Miss to Mrs. Tempest was set—for as in duty bound, Top-Sawyer Sam had accepted the condition insisted upon by Theron Tempest, and assumed the family name.

And in one short month thereafter, Berthine not only made her hero supremely happy, but Squire Nelson also entered the marriage state. Of course he wedded Mrs. Tempest, and it would have been difficult to pick out the most charming, blushing bride.

"Top-Sawyer Sam" faithfully kept his parting pledge to Yellowhammer Jones, and saw that he suffered nothing from the loss of his good right arm, financially speaking. And it really seemed a blessing in disguise for the gambler; he really reformed, and died, sincerely repenting his many sins, several years after the date of this story.

THE END.

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